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Allegiances

WindClan

Leader- Redstar: Red-and-white tabby tom with yellow eyes

Deputy- Morningshine: Black-and-white she-cat with bright light yellow eyes and a scar across her face

Medicine cat- Softear: Creamy she-cat with green eyes and a curled left ear

Medicine cat apprentice- Shadepaw: Dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Moor Runners

Sloestrike: Gray tom with one white paw and light blue eyes

Bluetail: Blue-gray she-cat with lighter paws and green eyes

Logstorm: Oak-brown tom with dark ears, forehead, back, tail tip, and orange eyes

Brackenmist: Bracken-colored tabby tom with blue eyes
Apprentice, Bluepaw

Ravenstem: Lithe fluffy black tom with green eyes

Lakespots: Dappled blue tabby she-cat with lighter patches and yellow eyes

Rainstream: Mottled gray she-cat with dark flecks and blue eyes

Rippleblaze: Dark gray tom with amber eyes

Rabbitspring: Gray-and-white tom with a short tail and green eyes

Gorseflower: Brown tabby she-cat with lighter paws and pale-green eyes

Darkfeather: Dark gray she-cat with lighter spots under eyes, dark back, lighter muzzle, and green eyes

Cinderlight: Light gray she-cat with light blue eyes

Apprentice, Greenpaw

Quailfeather: Small gray tom with lighter chin and paws with amber eyes

Apprentice, Wisppaw

Breezeblaze: Russet tabby tom with yellow eyes

Silversong: Lithe light gray tabby she-cat with dark stripes and beautiful light blue eyes

Tunnelers

Mothfoot: Dappled golden tabby she-cat with green eyes

Wolfleaf: Pale silver tabby tom with dark stripes and yellow eyes

Finchsong: White-and-gray tabby she-cat with orange eyes

Wollyfire: Brown-and-white tom with orange eyes

Driftbird: Dark brown tabby she-cat with lighter paws and light gray eyes

Thrushleaf: Pale ginger she-cat with soft green eyes

Queens

Hawkpool: Brown tabby she-cat with orange eyes (Mother to Wolfleaf's kits: Fernkit & Slatekit)

Nutfoot: Red-brown she-cat with green eyes and lighter paws (Mother to Rabbitspring's kits: Woolkit & Fawnkit)

Apprentices

Bluepaw: Dark gray she-cat with lighter spots under eyes, lighter chest, tail tip, and dark blue eyes

Greenpaw: Gray-and-white tom with green eyes

Wisppaw: Delicate gray she-cat with long fur, short legs, and blue eyes

Elders

Whiskertail: Gray-and-white patched tom with yellow eyes and long fur

Robinfoot: Brown she-cat with a red-brown chest and green eyes

Jayfang: Silver tabby tom with blue eyes and scars over each eye, blind

Kits

Fernkit: Dark brown tabby tom with lighter paws and green eyes

Slatekit: Gray tabby she-cat with dark stripes, lighter paws, and green eyes

Woolkit: Fluffy red-brown she-cat with yellow eyes

Fawnkit: Gray-and-white she-cat with a short tail and hazel eyes

ThunderClan

Leader- Copperstar: Copper tabby tom with lighter paws and blue eyes

Deputy- Sunwatcher: Golden tabby she-cat with green eyes

Medicine cat- Graystep: Dark gray she-cat with one lighter paw and orange eyes

Senior warriors

Flintheart: Solid gray tom with amber eyes

Tawnyfire: Tortoiseshell she-cat with orange eyes

Warriors

Maplestorm: Calico she-cat with yellow eyes

Foxwhisker: Fox-pelted tom with orange eyes

Apprentice, Softpaw

Silverfrost: Silver tabby she-cat with lighter paws and green eyes

Sandwing: Pale ginger tabby she-cat with green eyes

Apprentice, Wasppaw

Ravenface: White tom with a black face mask and purple eyes

Heroncloud: White tom with gray patches and green eyes

Hazelshine: Pale brown tabby tom with yellow eyes

Daisystream: Fluffy cream she-cat with blue eyes

Bramblefire: Black-and-white tom with amber eyes

Queens

Amberlight: Yellow tabby she-cat with green eyes (Mother to Heroncloud's kits: Spiderkit & Specklekit)

Apprentices

Softpaw: White she-cat with gray patches and blue eyes

Wasppaw: Yellow tabby tom with black stripes, a long, spiky tail, and green eyes

Elders

Owlwhisker: Brown tabby tom with lighter chest and orange eyes

Whitefern: Pale-gray she-cat with green eyes

Kits

Spiderkit: Pale yellow tabby tom with amber eyes

Specklekit: Speckled golden tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

ShadowClan

Leader- Vixenstar: Light calico she-cat with amber eyes

Deputy- Gorsefeather: Gray tabby tom with green eyes

Apprentice, Cloudpaw

Medicine cat- Squirrelspots: Ginger tabby tom with green eyes

Medicine cat apprentice- Poppypaw: Calico she-cat with amber eyes

Senior warriors

Cindershine: Smoky gray she-cat with yellow eyes

Apprentice, Moonpaw

Speckleleaf: Yellow spotted she-cat with green eyes

Rosespots: Rosy tom with amber eyes

Peartail: Ginger and white tom with a fluffy tail and blue eyes

Warriors

Speckedpuddle: Mottled gray she-cat with dark blue eyes

Echoshine: White she-cat with amber eyes

Apprentice, Oakpaw

Yelllowleaf: Yellow tabby she-cat with green eyes

Honeysky: Golden tabby tom with blue eyes

Apprentices

Cloudpaw: White she-cat with gray spots and blue eyes

Moonpaw: Black and white tom with amber eyes

Oakpaw: Bracken colored tabby tom with green eyes

Queens

Icebelly: White she-cat with green eyes (Mother to Rosespots' kit: Badgerkit)

Elders

Pebbleflower: Tortoiseshell she-cat with amber eyes

Kits

Badgerkit: Black tom with white markings and green eyes

RiverClan

Leader- Leader- Icestar: Gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Deputy- Rainface: Blue tabby tom with yellow eyes

Medicine cat- Ryeflight: Tan and white tom with green eyes

Senior warriors

Podsky: Blue tom with blue eyes

Toadtrout: Brown tom with amber eyes

Songwillow: Gray tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Apprentice, Brownpaw

Warriors

Pearpool: Cream she-cat with blue eyes

Berrybranch: Russet tom with green eyes

Milkstream: Light yellow she-cat with light blue eyes

Apprentice, Gorsepaw

Nightstrike: Black tom with white paws and amber eyes

Hazelspring: Golden brown tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Apprentices

Brownpaw: Brown tabby tom with yellow eyes

Gorsepaw: Cream tabby tom with amber eyes

Queens

Ripplefire: Blue tabby she-cat with amber eyes (Fostering Icestar and Rainface's kits: Sedgekit & Brackenkit)

Brownstripe: Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes (Mother to Ryeflight's kit: Weedkit)

Kits

Sedgekit: White she-cat with blue eyes

Brackenkit: Gray tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Weedkit: Dark brown tabby tom with green eyes

SkyClan

Leader- Squirrelstar: Dark ginger tabby tom with yellow eyes and deep scars across his face

Deputy- Sandleaf: Pale ginger tabby she-cat with leaf-green eyes

Apprentice, Whitepaw

Medicine cat- Pearfoot: Cream she-cat with a lighter front paw and blue eyes

Warriors

Splashbrook: Blue tabby she-cat with green eyes and lighter paws

Apprentice, Featherpaw

Dewbriar: Brown tabby tom with dark green eyes

Rainstrike: Pale gray she-cat with dark spots and stripes with dark blue eyes

Cloudbreeze: Fluffy white she-cat with gentle blue eyes

Apprentice, Minkpaw

Hickorytooth: Dark cream tabby tom with an overgrown tooth and purple eyes

Sedgewing: Light gray she-cat with soft orange eyes

Apprentice, Applepaw

Rocktooth: Gray tom with dark paws and yellow eyes

Smokespots: Mottled gray she-cat with darker markings and lighter paws with light yellow eyes

Hailfall: Dark gray tom with blue eyes

Redberry: Small, fluffy calico she-cat with amber eyes

Eelheart: Lithe silver tabby she-cat with orange eyes

Waspfall: Pale tabby tom with black stripes and yellow eyes

Otterwhisker: Light brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Lakewhisker: Brown tabby tom with yellow-green eyes

Snakefang: Dark brown tom with lighter paws and green eyes

Applestorm: Auburn tabby she-cat with green eyes

Ivyscar: Silver and white tabby she-cat with three scars across her eye with one blue eye

Plumwing: Blue tortoiseshell she-cat with yellow eyes

Thrushfur: Gray tom with green eyes

Bluepool: Blue-gray she-cat with orange eyes and darker markings

Robinfeather: Russet tabby she-cat with a lighter chest and paws, yellow eyes

Vinesplash: Gray tabby tom with blue eyes

Blizzardheart: White tom with blue eyes

Shadowfall: Dark brown tabby tom with lighter paws and green eyes

Apprentices

Whitepaw: Light gray tabby she-cat with white paws and yellow eyes

Minkpaw: Brown tom with orange eyes

Applepaw: Russet tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Featherpaw: Fluffy gray tabby she-cat with dark stripes and green eyes

Queens

Eaglestorm: Yellow tabby she-cat with bright green eyes (Mother to

Lakewhisker's kits: Timberkit & Cloverkit)

Peardawn: Creamy she-cat with orange eyes (Mother to Waspfall's kits: Lightkit, Fernkit, and Dawnkit)

Whitesky: White she-cat with gold eyes (Mother to Hickorytooth's kits: Leafkit & Lilykit)

Elders

Flowersong: Gray tabby she-cat with dark stripes and lighter belly, paws, tail, and muzzle with green eyes

Rainfrost: Gray tom with dark spots and blue eyes

Blossomshine: Tortoiseshell she-cat with bright yellow eyes

Birchspirit: Pale yellow tabby tom with ice-blue eyes

Kits

Timberkit: Brown tabby tom with lighter paws and green eyes

Cloverkit: Dark brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Lightkit: Light cream she-cat with orange eyes

Fernkit: Pale tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Dawnkit: Gray tabby she-cat with light yellow eyes

Leafkit: Mottled brown and white she-cat with yellow eyes

Lilykit: White she-cat with yellow eyes

Cats Outside The Clans

Maple: Calico tom with blue eyes

Cherry: Cherry red tabby she-cat with brown eyes (Mother to Maple's kits: Juniper, Marsh, and Sky)

Juniper: Ginger tabby tom with hazel eyes

Marsh: White tom with brown eyes

Sky: Blue pointed she-cat with blue eyes and dark tufted ears

Pepper: Gray and white spotted she-cat with yellow eyes

Ziggy: Blue tabby tom with green eyes

Naoki: Brown tabby she-cat with teal eyes

Tiki: Yellow tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Ebony: Black tom with hazel eyes

Blackthorne: Black and white she-cat with brown eyes

Aspen: White she-cat with brown eyes

Lark: White she-cat with yellow eyes

Prologue

The moon glowed over Softear's head as she padded up the hill toward the Moonpool. Beside her, Shadepaw's head drooped with exhaustion and she inwardly purred. *He's only been an apprentice for a few moons,* she thought to herself, *and yet he's not used to going to the Moonpool.* She nudged him his shoulder with her nose and his head jerked up, eyes wide.

"It's too cold for this, Softear," grumbled Graystep as the older she-cat limped to her side. "What if the Moonpool is frozen over? We can't share tongues with StarClan if we freeze to death." Her voice was bothered and Softear twitched her curled ear at the grumpy she-cat.

"Don't worry, Graystep." She replied, trying to keep her voice light and friendly. "We'll get there, share tongues with StarClan, and get out as quickly as possible."

The older medicine cat grunted. "We shouldn't be here in the first place," she growled, glaring at Softear. "We should be preparing for leafbare back at our camps."

A voice piped up from ahead of them. "But if we don't share tongues with StarClan," Poppypaw said. "We could miss something. Don't you want to know if something will happen soon?"

Graystep snorted, her fluffy ragged tail flicking. "You're unbearably naive, Poppypaw." She meowed, her voice rough. She shook her head. "If we missed anything, StarClan could send one of their warriors to us in our sleep."

"Don't call my apprentice naive, Graystep." Growled Squirrelspots as he turned around, glaring at the ThunderClan medicine cat. "You might be older than dirt, but you should respect the younger generation."

Softear felt mildly surprised at the tom's words. *He knows how to*

fight, she reminded herself with a glance at Graystep. *He's been a warrior and seen battle. But would he provoke Graystep into fighting?*

Graystep's fur bristled. "Why don't you come say that to my face, ShadowClan mouse-dung?" She retorted hotly, her voice rising with anger. "Or are you too scared to fight the oldest medicine cat?"

Shadepaw groaned and bounded between the two arguing cats. "Will the two of you shut your mouths?" He meowed rudely. Softear's eyes widened and she opened her mouth to reprimand him before he cut her off. "Honestly, are you both kits? Of course, we have to come here, Graystep. If we didn't, what would our Clans think? That we've lost faith in StarClan?"

Graystep looked ready to shred Shadepaw's ears into stubs but she didn't reply. Softear felt relieved as the elderly medicine cat trudged on, her ragged tail lashing behind her.

She fixed Shadepaw with a stern look as she fell into step beside her apprentice. "You need to watch your tongue when speaking to older cats," she hissed out of the corner of her mouth. "Especially when it's a medicine cat. Graystep might be snappy and irritable, but you need to respect her as she knows more than we do."

Shadepaw's ear twitched in acknowledgment of her words and stalked on without speaking until they reached the top of the hill that overlooked the lake territories below. Shadepaw turned and gazed across the starlit land that stretched on seemingly forever. Softear wondered what was going on in her apprentice's dark tabby head but decided against questioning.

Instead, she nosed him on and took the lead in front of the other medicine cats. Standing beside the SkyClan medicine cat, Pearfoot, she stared at the dappled Moonpool. Stars reflected off the pool as the soft cascading water from the small waterfall as it fell, filling the large pond.

"It's beautiful," breathed Ryeflight as he strode to Softear's side. His green eyes were wide with awe as he stared at the water, the stars reflecting in his eyes.

Softear nodded. "Come on; we should get this done with quickly." She meowed and headed down the small decline and circled the pool of water. Her fluffy tail swished behind her as she waited for Shadepaw to catch up before crouching in front of the water. Leaning forward, she lapped gingerly at the water's surface and closed her eyes.

At once, her eyes fluttered open and she was in the familiar lush clearing of StarClan's hunting grounds. She pushed herself to her paws and looked around for the cat she'd always seen when going to the Moonpool. *Where is Shadedfern?* The ancient medicine cat had always spoken to her, even as an apprentice. She wondered if the tom was visiting some other cat.

"Softear," the familiar growl of the tom made her turn her head as Shadedfern stalked towards her. She sat down, her tail curled neatly around her front paws as she dipped her head.

"Hello again, Shadedfern." She meowed. Her pointed ear pulled back and pressed against her head respectfully. Softear looked up to see the tom scowling at her, which wasn't surprising. He often was scowling or growling. It was natural and if he wasn't doing either of those, Softear grew worried. "How are you tonight?"

Shadedfern flicked his tail dismissively without answering her kind question. "That is not why I came here, Softear." He meowed, his voice flat with no emotion.

Softear nodded. "Of course, Shadedfern." She straightened her back and gazed at the tom. "Go on." She urged.

The ancient medicine cat's ears twitched in annoyance as he sat down. His tail flicked behind him and Softear blinked, lowering her chin ever so slightly to not appear arrogant or above him. *The smallest things can set him off.* She thought to herself. "I come bearing a message from StarClan." He meowed.

Softear's green eyes widened slightly in shock and she opened her mouth before clamping it shut as the medicine cat went on.

"There will be a cat with pale fur, tufted ears, and eyes like the sky."

He meowed, his eyes fixed on Softear's as he spoke. She dug her claws into the ground as she tried her best not to flinch when he twitched. "She will come from a place not far from the heart of WindClan, but her destiny will rattle the lives of every cat around the lake."

Softear jumped to her paws, fur prickling with apprehension. "What do you mean?" She asked, wincing at how fearful her voice sounded. "What will she do? Destroy the Clans?"

Shadedfern didn't answer as the world around her spun and the tom began to blur in front of her. "She will change the Clans!" He shouted and Softear took a step back, fur bristling. "Guide her paws!"

"Shadedfern!" Softear reached out with a paw to the tom, but he vanished and her claws curled around thin air.

"Softear!" Paws grasped her shoulders and shook her until her eyes flew open. Ryeflight was towering over her, his eyes concerned and narrowed. "Softear, are you alright?"

Softear blinked dazed up at the tom as her eyes adjusted to the dark gloom of the Moonpool's rocky outcropping. "Huh?" She mumbled and shook her head, a buzz sounding in her ears, high-pitched and annoying.

Shadepaw bounded to Ryeflight's side, his amber eyes glowing with worry and slight fear. "You were thrashing," he meowed. "You nearly kicked me into the Moonpool before Ryeflight pulled me away."

"Sorry," she meowed to her apprentice, feeling hot shame wash over her as she scrambled hastily to her paws. The other medicine cats were sleeping, but their ears twitched when she spoke. "We need to head back to WindClan's camp right away." She told Ryeflight. Worry lined her mew and the tan-and-white tom seemed to understand.

"Right," he meowed and angled his ears to the way they came. "Be careful," Ryeflight warned and took a pace toward Softear and

lowered his voice to a murmur. "Is everything alright?"

Softear shook her head slightly and hissed back. "I saw something in my dream. I can't say for certain that I know what it meant, but I have to talk to Redstar as soon as possible."

Ryeflight's eyes flashed with understanding as he nodded. "Be careful." He advised and took a step back before raising his voice so Shadepaw could hear. "May StarClan light your path always, Softear. I'll be looking forward to the next meeting."

While she knew they were the words of an honest medicine cat looking out for a fellow healer, Softear couldn't help but detect the slightest sliver of fear lining the tom's formal words as she swiftly nodded and herded Shadepaw away from the pool. Once out of the outcropping, her apprentice spoke.

"What was that all about?" He asked, looking at his mentor with wide unblinking amber eyes. Softear glanced at him out of the corner of her eye and sighed.

"I saw something in my dream," she answered curtly, trying her best not to give much away when she herself didn't know what Shadedfern's words meant. "All I know is that I need to report to Redstar when we get back to camp." She added.

Shadepaw said nothing more as they trekked through the fields of unclaimed territory and wove through the wheat stalks that bordered ThunderClan and WindClan's territories. Softear silently thanked her apprentice for not pressing further as they crossed the abandoned Thunderpath and entered WindClan's territory.

Softear was silent as she and Shadepaw padded up the steep hills that fed into the vast open moor that WindClan owned. A flicker of pride pricked her paws as she thought of all the times her Clanmates had protected this land with claw and tooth from SkyClan and ThunderClan. Neither of the neighboring Clans claimed a piece of the moorland and Softear inwardly sighed with relief and satisfaction.

She felt the earth beneath her paws grow hollow and she wondered

if any of the tunnelers were underground, digging and scraping away at the moist dirt beneath them. The Clan's most dangerous job was in the tunnels with no light and no scent of the world above. Softear shuddered as she recalled Snailpelt's death several moons ago. The poor tom was too slow to escape a cave-in that nearly crippled Sloestrike, who was tasked with seeing how the tunnelers were doing with the new tunnel that led from the WindClan camp straight into the heart of ThunderClan's forest.

"Who is guarding the camp tonight?" Shadepaw's mew cut through her memories of the tunnelers' death and she looked at him.

"I think it's Cinderlight and Bluetail tonight," she lied, even though the two had guarded the camp the night before and were on the dawn patrol that morning. "Why do you ask?"

Shadepaw's whiskers twitched as though he sensed her lie. "Just curious," he answered and Softear's eyebrows furrowed, but she didn't comment on the curtness that colored his tone.

When they reached the camp entrance, Softear nodded to the two guards, Rainstream and Rippleblaze as they entered. She nodded to Shadepaw, dismissing him to his nest while she headed for Redstar's den. Poking her head inside the hollowed-out tree, she called his name softly.

Redstar answered almost at once. "Softear?" He sounded surprised as she slipped inside. Bark raked her back but she tried her best not to show her discomfort. "You and Shadepaw are back already?"

Softear nodded, despite knowing the tom couldn't see her in the darkness. "I had a dream from StarClan," she meowed. She heard shuffling from back in the den as Redstar sat up. She felt his silent encouragement and went on. "Shadedfern told me of a cat with pale fur, dark tufted ears, and eyes like the sky coming here. He said that she'd change the lives of every cat around the lake."

If Redstar made a face at her words, Softear didn't see it. "What does it mean?" Her leader questioned, his voice taut with anxiety.

Softear felt a pang of sympathy for the young leader. She'd been an

apprentice when Redstar became a warrior, earning the name Redfoot. When she'd gotten her full name, Redfoot became deputy and then-leader when her mentor, Swiftleaf died from a SkyClan patrol that found him looking for herbs at the border. "I'm not sure," she replied finally, her tail twitching with wonder. "But I'm certain it won't happen for many seasons." She added quickly.

Redstar closed his eyes for a brief moment and Softear felt irritation prick her paws. "I hope you're right, Softear." He murmured and Softear dipped her head to him. "Thank you. You are dismissed."

"Of course, Redstar," Softear replied and turned around, heading out of the den. As she stood in the clearing, the moonlight bathed her pelt. Tilting her head back, she looked up at the pale half-moon. "I hope you're right, Shadedfern." She meowed aloud. "For WindClan's sake."

Chapter 1

A paw toppled Sky over onto her back and she let out a little squeak. Above her, Juniper pinned her to the ground, a smug expression on his ginger face. Sky groaned and kicked her brother off with her hind legs.

"Steady on, will you?" She meowed crossly, glaring angrily at her older brother. Juniper looked down at her with a snicker. "You keep knocking me over!"

Her other brother piped up from behind her as he slid to Juniper's side. "That's the point," Marsh sneered. Sky flattened her ears to her head, anger bubbling beneath her pelt.

"That doesn't mean you have to," Sky retorted, her tail bushing in annoyance. She glared at her brothers, frustrated that she was the one they always picked on. *I might be the only she-cat,* she thought angrily, *but that doesn't mean they need to pick on me!*

"Calm down, Sky." Meowed the voice of her mother and all three kittens turned at her voice. Sky peered up at Cherry as she laid on the hayloft that overlooked the barn. "They're just playing."

Sky's whiskers twitched in irritation and she stamped her paw to show it. "But they're intentionally trying to get a reaction out of me!" She meowed, her voice a high-pitched whine.

Cherry waved her paw dismissively. "They're toms," she meowed sternly, as though that explained everything. Sky's ears fell and she stared down at her dark paws in shame. "Don't overreact."

Sky grumbled in response and turned away from her mother and brothers and stalked away. Her ears burned with anger and shame as she exited the barn through the large doors. Her paws tingled as the grass ticked her pads and she looked up, staring at the trees beyond her family's territory.

A pang of emptiness hit her as she looked over her shoulder, seeing Juniper and Marsh wrestling while Cherry encouraged them. *Where are you, Father?* She thought as she sat down, staring up at the clear blue sky. The bright yellow sun glowed, warming her pale fur and making her purr.

"Enjoying the sunshine, sunflower?" Mewed a familiar teasing voice as Maple rounded the corner and approached his daughter. "You always seem to be out here."

Sky turned, excitement shooting through her as she saw the juicy prey between her father's jaws. Two mice and a squirrel! She charged at him as he dropped the prey. At once, the musty scents of the forest filled her nostrils and bathed her tongue. Her mouth watered at the thought of taking a bite of the plump prey. Craning her neck to look up at her father, she grinned. "Good catch?"

Maple leaned down and licked her head, making her stick her pink tongue out. "You would've loved it out there," he purred as he hunkered down, letting her clamber onto his shoulders with her paws on his head. "The prey was practically falling into my paws." Grasping the prey between his teeth, he headed into the barn with Sky on his shoulders.

Juniper spotted him at once and released Marsh's ear, eyes sparkling. "Dad!" He meowed, trampling over his brother to get to Maple.

"Dad!" Marsh scrambled to his paws and hurried after Juniper, tail sticking high over his back.

Maple dropped the prey and crouched, readying himself for the two toms to crash into him. Even though they were about six moons old, they were about the size of Maple and they towered over Sky, who was smaller but the same age.

Sky slithered off her father's back as he was tackled by Juniper and Marsh. She grasped the squirrel's tail between her jaws and hauled it toward the wooden ladder that led up to the hayloft. Sinking her claws into the soft wood, she climbed up the ladder and scrambled up onto the loft. Panting, she dragged it towards Cherry, who was

dozing and unaware of Maple's return. She adjusted her grip on the squirrel's tail and trotted towards her mother.

Cherry's nose twitched and one of her eyes opened as Sky approached. "I thought I smelled squirrel," she meowed and propped herself up, staring hungrily at the fresh-kill.

"It's for you," Sky meowed, her voice muffled by the fluffy tail of the prey. Setting the squirrel down, she pushed it towards her mother. "I thought you'd want it since it's your favorite." She expected her mother to thank her for her kindness, but instead, Cherry pulled the prey towards herself and started eating.

Disappointment rose in her belly as she turned away to the ledge of the hayloft and looked down to see her brothers tucking into the mice. *I guess I'll have to hunt my own prey tonight again.* She thought, leaping down into a pile of hay and hopped out, shaking her fur.

Maple looked at her and flicked his tail. "Come on," he meowed, jerking his head to the barn doors. "I'll teach you how to hunt mice."

Sky brightened but Juniper's voice made her ears flatten.

"Can we come too?" He asked, his mouth full of the mouse. Juniper swallowed and padded towards Maple, his eyes wide and pleading. "We can catch prey, too!"

Cherry's voice piped up from the hayloft. "We all can go," she meowed and Sky watched in annoyance as her mother gracefully leaped down from the ledge and nodded to Marsh. "Come on; we don't want to be out when night falls."

"Why not?" Marsh asked, rising to his paws and trotting over, Sky in tow.

Maple gave his son a stern look. "Because the Clan cats who live close to us don't like it when they see us hunting." He replied, his voice tight with fury.

Cherry nodded. "Besides, would you want to stumble upon a ThunderClan patrol?" She whisked her fluffy tail without letting

Marsh answer.

"How do you know so much about the Clans?" Sky asked as they filed out of the barn. She pricked her ears as Cherry groaned and looked over her shoulder.

"Because we've had run-ins with the Clans," her mother's voice was sharp and it only fueled Sky's curiosity.

"Were you ever part of one?"

Maple flicked his ear. "I was," he answered before Cherry could speak. "I was a ShadowClan cat before I was exiled when my Clanmates found out I took a kittypet for a mate." The fur along Cherry's spine rose and he sent an apologetic look at her. "Your mother and I left and came to the barn. We've lived there ever since."

"What was it like living in ShadowClan?" Juniper questioned, his eyes sparkling with wonder. "Was it great? Did you fight? Did you kill anyone?"

"Juniper!" Cherry swung her head around and glared at her son, who puffed out his chest in defiance.

Sky couldn't help but admire his bravery to stand up against Cherry's stern hostility. *He's probably as curious as I am,* she thought with a twitch of her tail.

Marsh chimed in with his own question. "What did you do there?" He meowed, his powerful shoulders spiking up and down as he walked alongside Juniper. The ginger tabby tom was bigger than Marsh, but barely taller than a mouse-length. Sky envied her brothers' height as her ears barely reached their shoulders.

Maple flicked his tail. "I hunted, fought, and helped my Clan." He meowed, looked at the sky. "My Clanmates taught me the ways of the warrior code, and that StarClan watched over us even in the darkest times." His blue eyes flashed with something Sky couldn't detect and went on hurriedly. "I made good friends in ShadowClan, but so many turned on me when I said I'd taken a non-Clan cat for a

mate."

"But," Cherry added hastily. "None of that matters now. The Clans are our enemies as much as we are theirs. Even though you have ShadowClan blood, we do not wish to return to any of the five Clans."

"What was your warrior name?" Sky asked, looking up curiously at her father with wide blue eyes.

"Mapleclaw," her father replied and whisked his tail for silence as Sky opened her mouth to ask more questions. "You wanted to know how to hunt, right? That's what we're doing here."

Cherry nodded and turned to face her kits, her eyes mainly resting on her sons. "Remember: Mice are the easiest prey to catch. Voles and squirrels are good, but a squirrel can outrun the swiftest cat." She meowed and Sky turned her attention from her family to the far moor. Her tufted ears pricked as she saw little black dots traveling slowly across the endless fields. Were those WindClan cats she'd heard stories about? *What's it like to be in a Clan?* "Did you hear that, Sky?"

She jumped as her mother nipped at her right ear and crouched down with a low, threatening hiss. Cherry glared at her, and her claws dug into the ground. "Yes," she growled through gritted teeth. "I heard you."

Maple twitched his whiskers and brushed against Cherry's flank, his eyes glinting. He nodded to Sky and motioned with his head towards the moor. "You go into the denser part of the forest," he instructed. "If you catch anything, we'll meet back up here." Turning to Marsh and Juniper, he added. "You two go into the back part of ThunderClan's territory, so you aren't seen by any patrols."

"What about you?" Juniper asked, his hazel eyes flicking from his mother to his father. "Where will you go?"

"We will go towards ThunderClan's camp," Maple replied smoothly and Sky couldn't hide her shoulder fur prickling with unease. Her father saw this and blinked warmly at her. "Don't worry, I was

trained to fight. We can hold our own."

Cherry yawned. "Let's get this over with so we can go back to the barn," she grumbled and shook out her thick pelt. "Good hunting."

Sky nodded obediently and went in front of her brothers, wanting to get away from her mother's disapproving stare as fast as possible. As she plunged into the forest, she let the scents of the woods bathe her tongue and she could nearly taste the dew. She heard the call of a crow as it launched itself into the air, drawing itself into the air on its mighty wings.

Sky felt her heart lift as she took off after the black-feathered bird. Her paws flew over the ground, scaring away prey she didn't care about. She felt weightless, excited and...free. She parted her jaws in a gleeful yowl as she followed the crow through the trees. The ground under her paws shifted as she tore out of the forest, heading for the uplands. She didn't realize where she was going until she stopped, chest aching, flanks heaving, and throat burning. She sat down heavily, panting hard.

"Hey!" A loud call startled her and she jumped to her paws, her claws unsheathing as she looked up. A dark-furred she-cat with blue eyes was racing towards her down a hill. "Stay right there!"

Something in her voice made Sky obey and she stayed where she was, curiously waiting for the she-cat. She looked about Sky's age if a little bit older. But her legs were powerful and long, stretching for more than a mouse-length.

"Who are you?" Spat the she-cat as she scrambled to a halt in front of her, standing a fox-length away. "Are you a ThunderClan cat?"

Sky shook her head. "I'm not a Clan cat at all," she meowed, leaning forward to sniff the she-cat.

The she-cat jerked back with a warning hiss, only for her shoulders to relax as she realized Sky was alone. "What are you doing on Clan territory?" She asked, still a bit wary.

Sky barely heard her question as she smelled heather and wind on

the she-cat's pelt. She breathed in the unfamiliar cat's scent, reveling in the moorland scent on her pelt. A paw hit the top of her ear and she let out a squeak of alarm, shrinking into her pelt.

"Well?" The other she-cat demanded impatiently. "What are you doing on Clan territory?" She repeated, her tail tip twitching back and forth.

Sky hesitated. Would she tell this cat that she was supposed to hunt on a territory that wasn't her own? Swallowing hard, she dug her claws into the ground and glared at the she-cat. "Why do you want to know?" She challenged, her eyes narrowing.

At once the she-cat's shoulders stiffened once more and she dropped into a half-crouch, hissing. "Never mind that," she spat. "I'm going to rip you to mouse dust!" With a snarl, the she-cat leaped at Sky, paws outstretched with her claws extended.

Sky fell under the she-cat, half-stunned as she clawed at her pale pelt. Icy realization washed over her as she slid out her claws, raising her paws to grip her shoulders. With a growl of pain and anger, she sank her hind claws into her belly and twisted, sinking her teeth into her left forepaw.

The she-cat let out a hiss of pain as she toppled over. Lashing out with a paw, she scratched Sky's cheek and fell onto her side, only to roll over and jump to her paws. Sky arched her back, hissing and spitting with her bristling. Rearing on her hind legs, she aimed a blow for her shoulder, but the she-cat dodged easily to the side. Curling a paw of unsheathing claws around Sky's hind foreleg, she forced her to the ground and sank her teeth into her shoulder.

"You fight like a kittypet," snarled the she-cat as she released her shoulder and raked her back with churning hind paws.

Pain sickened Sky as she let out an infuriated yowl, mixed with agony. "You fight like a blind kit," she retorted, her teeth grinding together. The she-cat thrust her onto her belly, pushing her to the ground.

"Give in," she growled, her claws sinking deeper and deeper into her

flesh. "Do it." Sky hissed as blood trickled from the bite on her shoulder as she eventually went limp under the she-cat. At once, the she-cat released her grip on her and took a few paces back, eyeing her warily. "Now, what's your name?"

Taken aback by the she-cat's sudden change of tone, Sky scrambled to her paws and watched as the she-cat lapped gingerly at the bite on her forepaw. Shaking out her fur, she sat down and slowly licked the bite on her shoulder, one eye on the stranger. "My name is Sky." She replied slowly.

The she-cat stopped cleaning her bite and stared at her, eyes flicking up and down. "That's a strange name," she meowed breezily.

"What about you?" Sky asked, narrowing her eyes. "What's your name?"

"Bluepaw," replied the she-cat as she puffed out her chest.

"B-Bluepaw?" Sky spluttered, staring at the she-cat in shock. "What kind of name is that?" The proud look melted off Bluepaw's face in an instant and she glared at Sky.

Bluepaw's eyes flashed with anger and she bared her teeth in a snarl. "It's an *honorable* name, kittypet." She retorted angrily and Sky felt her pelt bristle with indignation. "I'm a moor runner apprentice of WindClan. And I'm going to be the best warrior in the five Clans!"

Sky snorted, then winced as her shoulder stung. "You Clan cats are very cocky," she meowed, eyes rolling. "I'd better go. My parents will be wondering where I am." Getting unsteadily to her paws, she gasped in pain, staggering.

Bluepaw's eyes widened and lunged forward, supporting Sky on her shoulder. "Are you alright?" She asked, concern trickling like a creek into her mew. Sky blinked in surprise before she gritted her teeth.

"I'm fine," she growled and sank her claws into the ground, trying to steady herself. "Just a bit battered and sore."

"You don't fight much, do you?" Bluepaw queried, her eyes flashing with confusion.

Sky shook her head. "My family and I aren't trained to fight." Her mind flashed to her father's words:

"We will go towards ThunderClan's camp," Maple replied smoothly and Sky couldn't hide her shoulder fur prickling with unease. Her father saw this and blinked warmly at her. "Don't worry, I was trained to fight. We can hold our own."

"In any case," she went on rapidly. "We don't need to fight other cats to survive. ThunderClan doesn't attack us, and your Clan doesn't go near our barn."

"Barn?" Bluepaw echoed curiously. "What's a barn?"

As Sky went on to explain her home, the clouds that dappled the sky rolled in, thick and dark with the strong promise of rain. The sun was blocked and the air chilled as Sky shuddered against the apprentice.

Bluepaw's ear twitched as a raindrop splashed against her ear and she looked up. "How far away is your barn?" She asked, turning her blue gaze on Sky.

Sky hesitated and flattened her ears as the rain started to fall harder and faster. It lashed against her side, soaking her to the bone as it dripped from her whiskers. "I-I think I can manage the walk back," she meowed, her teeth chattering as she looked at Bluepaw.

The apprentice's eyes narrowed and she shook the cold clear droplets from her head. "I'll take you back to WindClan," she meowed, and added as Sky stiffened. "I can tell that bite is hurting. And, to be honest, my bite hurts too." She meowed, nodding to Sky's injured shoulder. "Besides, Softear and Shadepaw wouldn't turn away a cat that was injured and at risk of getting sick."

Sky wanted to protest, to say that she could handle herself, but the

more her shoulder ached from the rain, the colder she felt. Eventually, she slowly nodded and Bluepaw supported her on her shoulder as they headed for the moorland away from the forest.

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It was nearly dusk by the time Bluepaw and Sky reached the WindClan camp. The rain had eased ever so slightly, but it still drenched the two she-cats and soaked into their fur.

At the entrance of the camp were two cats; a gray tom with light blue eyes, and a fluffy black tom with green eyes. The two toms narrowed their eyes as Bluepaw and Sky passed, but neither of them commented. Sky's eyes widened in shock as she saw cats ringed around a large clearing. So many were eating plump rabbits, sharing the stories of the day, or just laying in the rain.

A blue-gray she-cat noticed the two she-cats before the rest and loudly called out. "Bluepaw, who's that?"

Sky's fur prickled with unease as eyes turned to stare at her and the apprentice. She shrank in her soaked pelt, wishing a hole would appear at her paws and swallow her whole.

"It's okay," Bluepaw's breath stirred her ear fur and she relaxed slightly. She could trust this cat. Raising her voice, she mewed. "I found this cat nearly crossing the border from ThunderClan's territory. She isn't a Clan cat, but she's injured and needs rest." Sky couldn't help but notice she left out the fact *she* attacked her, but decided against pointing it out.

"Do I smell fresh blood?" A dark tabby head poked out of a hole not far from Bluepaw and Sky. When the cat bundled out of the hole, Sky saw that it was a tom. When his amber eyes met hers, they narrowed like fire. "Who's that?"

"That's what I'd like to know, Shadepaw." Rumbled a voice not far from the two she-cats and Bluepaw flinched as a black-and-white she-cat with blazing light yellow eyes approached them.

Bluepaw gulped and averted her eyes to her paws, shrinking

beneath her pelt a little. "M-Morningshine," she meowed, her voice trembling almost as much as herself. "I-I didn't bring her here out of dis-"

Morningshine's eyes narrowed and she silenced the apprentice with a flick of her tail. With her eyes trained on Sky, she circled the pair until she was in front of the she-cat. "Who are you?" She asked, her voice as cold as winter.

Bluepaw piped up, her voice cracking. "T-this is Sky," she meowed quickly. Sky could hear the fear in her voice as she peered up at the larger she-cat. As she sized up Morningshine, she couldn't understand why the she-cat was so scared. "She's a barn cat, but she was injured and out in the rain when I found her."

Morningshine turned her gaze to the apprentice, glowing with disdain. "I did not ask you, Bluepaw." She growled and the she-cat flinched. "However," she turned back to Sky. "I will allow you to take her to Softear's den."

"Wait a moment, Morningshine," interrupted a dappled golden tabby she-cat. She eyed Sky warily before unsheathing her curled claws. "How can we trust what Bluepaw says?"

"Yes, how can we?" Agreed a brown-and-white tom as he slid to the she-cat's side. "She's been an apprentice for barely a few days. She's right out of the nursery."

Bluepaw dug her claws into the ground and opened her mouth to retort, but a softer voice made her freeze.

"My daughter is as capable of defending her Clan and hunting as you are, Wollyfire." A second dark-furred cat with friendly blue eyes approached her, tail high above her back. "Bluepaw is just like Greenpaw and Wisppaw. Any cat who thinks otherwise can explain themselves to my face."

Wollyfire narrowed his eyes but backed off. "Whatever you say, Darkfeather." He growled, murmuring to his friend who had originally questioned Bluepaw's word.

Darkfeather blinked warmly at Bluepaw, who looked grateful if not embarrassed. "Come," she meowed, striding to Sky's side and taking all her weight on her side. "I'll help take you to Softear and Shadepaw."

Morningshine didn't move as she stared at Sky, making her wet fur prickle uncomfortably. "She's not a Clan cat," she meowed, her voice bland. "We do not need to waste our herbs."

Darkfeather's eyes narrowed slightly as she faced the she-cat. "She's young," she meowed in response, casting Sky a glance. "Do you want her injuries to get infected? Do you want her to die?"

Morningshine opened her mouth to reply when a lighter voice cut her off.

"Certainly not, Darkfeather." A red-and-white tabby tom emerged from a fallen tree log. His yellow eyes glowed with unknown thoughts and Sky dug her claws into the ground, steadying herself to hold his sun-like gaze. "Let them pass, Morningshine. Darkfeather's right: They both need to be treated."

Not looking particularly thrilled about the tom's words, Morningshine stared at Sky as she took a few steps to the side, letting Bluepaw and Darkfeather guide the loner towards the hole where the dark tabby tom popped out of.

The brown tabby narrowed his amber eyes as they passed, bringing up the rear. "Just because Redstar said you can be treated," he hissed as they went by. "Doesn't mean you can stay for as long as you like, you crow-food eating mange-pelt."

Sky felt her claws unsheathe on impulse and she wanted to slash his ears for the sake of hearing him squeal in pain. *Control yourself, Sky.* She thought and took a deep breath, allowing herself to relax and sheathe her claws before returning the tom's flinty glare.

"Softear?" Bluepaw called as they ducked under roots as dirt fell on their backs. "Are you in here? I need help."

"Is something wrong, Bluepaw?" Came the concerned mew of a cat Sky couldn't see. A cream-furred she-cat with green eyes and a curled ear shuffled out of the dark and rested her fern-like eyes on Sky. At once the she-cat's eyes widened and her tail fluffed out.

Darkfeather took no notice in the she-cat's response and nodded to the two younger cats. "Bluepaw found Sky here a bit roughed up by the border with ThunderClan," she reported. "I think a patrol got to her before she found the border."

The cream she-cat nodded, but her eyes were still trained on Sky. Something lit in her green eyes and she blinked, breaking eye contact with her. "Of course," she meowed distractedly. "Come with me and I'll check you over."

Reluctant to leave Darkfeather's side, Sky looked up at the she-cat. When the she-cat nodded encouragingly, she and Bluepaw followed the she-cat to a white-and-brown nest. Sky suspected that the white was sheep's wool and the brown was roots and brambles.

"I'll bring you four some prey when the next hunting patrol comes back," Darkfeather meowed. Her eyes rested warmly on Sky. "Are you hungry?"

Sky shook her head. "I am thirsty," she meowed, her voice cracking. Despite the rain that was easing outside, her throat felt as dry as wood.

"I'll fetch some soaked moss," the cream-furred she-cat meowed as she nosed Bluepaw's forepaw. "You've both got bites. I'll get some herbs for that when I've gotten that moss." Looking over her shoulder, she added. "Could you find Shadepaw, Darkfeather? He could treat their bites while I get water."

"Of course." The dark she-cat dipped her head and added to the two she-cats. "Don't worry; Softear is a brilliant medicine cat. You'll feel better in no time." With that, she turned tail and ducked out of the small cave.

Bluepaw winced as Softear instructed her to lap at it until Darkfeather sent Shadepaw arrived and turned to Sky. "This sucks,"

complained the apprentice. "How does your shoulder feel?"

"It'd suck less if you hadn't attacked me," Sky hissed in a low voice, but relaxed. "It burns like fire." A thought struck her like a lightning bolt. She looked at Bluepaw and Softear, distressed. "I can't stay here!" She wailed. "My family will be looking for me! They'll be wondering where I am!"

Softear flicked her tail as Bluepaw's eyes widened in shock. "Don't worry, little one." She soothed, brushing her paw across Sky's uninjured shoulder. "Once you've healed, we'll send you back home."

Sky flinched from the she-cat's touch and stared down at her paws. They were soaked and her claws were clogged with mud and grime. *Will I ever get to go home?*

Chapter 2

Sky flexed her shoulder as Bluepaw watched, her eyes interested. The bite stung, but it didn't feel too bad and she let out a sigh of relief.

"How is it?" Bluepaw asked, her head tilted to the side.

"Better," she purred, looking up at her friend. In the days since she'd been brought into WindClan's camp, she'd made friends with Bluepaw, Darkfeather, and Wisppaw. Apparently, Darkfeather was Bluepaw's mother and Wisppaw was the sister of Greenpaw, the other warrior apprentice. According to both apprentices and Darkfeather, they all were apprentices under moor runners.

Moor runners were the main warriors of WindClan and hunted and patrolled above ground. They were known as the "regular" warriors, who fought off invaders and protected the moor. Bluepaw, Greenpaw, and Wisppaw were the only apprentices, apart from Shadepaw, who was Softear's apprentice.

"We're lucky we aren't training to become tunnelers," Wisppaw had commented the day before as she visited Sky and Bluepaw in Softear's den. "I don't know why any cat would want to spend their time in darkness without the sun and clouds above their heads."

Tunnelers had the most dangerous job in the Clans. With their abilities below ground, their apprentices trained twice as long as moor runner apprentices. Cave-ins, floods, deaths, and injuries were common, despite having their most experienced Clanmates among them. Apprentices were keenly fought over and it was up to whoever was leader to decide who would be above ground chasing rabbits and who would be digging below.

"There hasn't been a tunneling apprentice for moons!" Remarked Wollyfire the same day Wisppaw had explained what tunnelers meant to Sky. "Redstar ought to have bees in his brain if he thinks we can dig alone with no younger blood."

"Redstar has his reasons for giving apprentices to the moor runners," argued Driftbird, another tunneler. "Besides, with kits in the nursery and more destined on the way, we'll have more paws in the tunnels in no time."

Sky wasn't so sure if any cat would want to be underground. Like Wisppaw had said, the sun and clouds are supposed to be on a cat's back, not on the backs of mud-soaked tunnelers. After all, a cat was supposed to be above the ground without fearing if something was going to collapse on them.

"Hey," Bluepaw meowed, touched her tail to her shoulder, jerking her out of her thoughts. "Are you okay?" Her eyes glittered with concern as she shifted closer.

Sky nodded, a sad jerk of her head. "I'm just thinking about going back home," she lied, faking a bright smile. "I can't wait." Real excitement fizzled in her paws as she thought of the comforting, familiar musty scents of hay and mice.

"You must be homesick," Bluepaw said, her voice half-hearted as she lowered her ears. "When do you want to leave?"

Sky noticed that her friend didn't look particularly happy that she was going home. *Maybe she wants to get out of Softear's den, like me.* She rose to her paws and gave a long, luxurious stretch, her tail arching above her back. "As soon as possible," she answered and looked at her friend. "Are you coming? I want to see if Darkfeather will escort us to the border."

"Us?" Bluepaw glanced up sharply, her blue eyes flashing with alarm. "What do you mean?"

"Are you not going to come with me to the border so I can go home?" Sky tipped her head to one side as she watched her friend. Was Bluepaw not going to wish her luck on her way home? As her spirits fell, Bluepaw nodded.

"Of course I'm coming with you," she meowed, rising to her paws with her injured forepaw dangling in the air. Sky suspected it still hurt bad enough to not walk on. "I don't think Softear has cleared

you for going home yet."

Sky rolled her eyes and waved her paw dismissively. "I don't care. I'm going home, I want to see my family." Bluepaw's eyes sharpened and she added. "Besides, I don't want to stay here forever."

"You'll be missed, you know." Bluepaw meowed, her voice quiet. Sky's eyes widened as she went on. "By Wisppaw, Darkfeather, and me. You're good company, Sky."

Sky padded towards her friends, touching her nose to hers. "Don't worry," she whispered. "We can meet each other at the border every day!"

Bluepaw drew back with wide eyes. "Are you serious?" She meowed, head shaking. "I can't do that!"

"Why not?" Pain flooded through Sky as she took a step away from her friend. "We'd be seeing each other without doing any harm!"

Bluepaw shook her head and flicked her tail. "It goes against the warrior code, Sky." She meowed, pain raw in her voice. "I'm sorry, but I can't break the warrior code."

Sky felt her fur bristle and she fought back the anger rising in her chest. "Fine," she spat, her voice breaking as Bluepaw looked up at her. "I'll go with Darkfeather." Whipping around, she stalked to the slope that led out of the den and slipped outside.

The sun was beating down on the camp hollow, warming the backs of the WindClan cats as they headed up to Morningshine, the Clan deputy, anxiously waiting to be assigned to a patrol. Even as the torrential rain that beat down a few sunrises before, the grassy hollow was ringed with cats basking in the sun.

A pang of something sharp hit Sky like a claw as she gazed around at the Clan cats. Her chest tightened as she saw Wollyfire, Driftbird, and Cinderlight carrying plump rabbits. The two tunnelers, Wollyfire and Driftbird, had sand in their fur while the lone moor runner, Cinderlight, had nothing on her fur. The three cats headed

to the prey heap and dropped their catches before chattering briefly and dispersing.

Cinderlight headed to the apprentice's den, which was sheltered beneath three fallen trees with their trunks hollowed out wide enough for cats to fit inside. She disappeared inside before emerging with Greenpaw and Wisppaw trudging behind her.

Driftbird and Wollyfire both shared an amused look before heading into the nursery, which was made up of a group of large boulders that surrounded a large patch of grass. The tunnelers made the roof of compacted mud, grass, and gorse so the rain and snow wouldn't get in and freeze the kits and queens.

"Why are they going into the nursery?" She wondered aloud as she headed for the leader's den. Redstar's den was a large fallen tree that was hollowed out for a den. She checked to make sure no cat was watching before she peeked inside the den. Redstar's scent was there, but it was stale. "Redstar?" She called into the darkness.

"He's not in there, barn cat." Growled a gruff voice and she jumped, spinning around to see Shadepaw glaring at her with undisguised mistrust and hostility. "He went on the dawn patrol."

Sky blinked at him before flattening her ears. "You could've told me before I called out like a mouse-brain." She retorted, her tail lashing as she fought to control herself. Her shoulder fur flattened as the tom narrowed his amber eyes. "Anyway, have you seen Darkfeather?"

Shadepaw twitched his ear. "She's in the warrior's den," he replied stiffly. "Why? Do you need her?"

She nodded, wishing the tom would stop being so hostile around her. "I'm going home today," she announced. Her heart froze as Shadepaw let out a grunt of approval.

"About time." Sky scoffed at his words and lashed her tail. "You snore too much."

"And you grouch too often," she flashed back and turned away, hot

with resentment as she headed for the warrior's cave. As she bundled inside of the cool underground cave, she breathed in the scent of all the cats that were inside. "Darkfeather?" She called out, ears pricked.

There was a low moan from one of the closer nests and Sky twitched her whiskers in amusement. "I-Is that you, Bluepaw?" Came the weary voice of the dark-furred moor runner.

Sky purred with amusement, her earlier attitude with Shadepaw gone. "Just me, Darkfeather." She replied and headed for the warrior's voice. "Come on, you said you'd take me home."

Darkfeather yawned and a flash of yellow teeth glinted in the dark gloom. "I-I did?" The warrior murmured, still half-asleep.

Sky nodded, aware that she couldn't see her. "Yes, you did. Let's go, I want to go home as fast as possible." She meowed impatiently.

"Don't be in such a hurry, barn cat." Snarled a hostile voice as green eyes flashed in the dark gloom. Sky felt her hackles raise as the Rabbitspring shouldered past. "You take up precious space and waste prey."

"Enough of that, Rabbitspring." Scowled Darkfeather as she rose to her paws and stretched, glaring at the warrior. "Sky has done nothing to you. Besides, she's the apprentices' age."

Rabbitspring grunted in reply. "You coddle her too much, Darkfeather." He growled. "She's a barn cat, not Bluepaw."

Darkfeather sized up the tom as Sky parted her jaws to retort. "Doesn't Morningshine want you on a hunting patrol, Rabbitspring? Better go unless you want shredded ears."

Rabbitspring snorted in contempt. "From who? Morningshine?"

Sky saw Darkfeather's claws unsheathing and glinting in the darkness. *Will they fight?*

"No," replied the she-cat calmly as she shoved her muzzle into his face. "From me." Rabbitspring jerked back with a soft hiss before

whirling around stalking up the small incline out of the den.

Sky felt her ears start to burn as she looked up gratefully at the dark she-cat. "Thanks," she meowed sheepishly.

Darkfeather's tail brushed against her flank and she licked her around the ears. "Don't worry about it," she purred. "Just because you live somewhere different, doesn't mean you should be bullied for it." She led the way toward the den entrance and Sky followed close behind, ears flattened against her head. "Are you excited to go home?" The warrior asked over her shoulder.

Sky felt her energy and enthusiasm return in a large, cascading wave. "Yes!" She meowed fervently, kneading the ground with her claws as they re-entered the clearing. "I can't wait to see my father and be among the hay again."

Darkfeather's eyes twinkled with amusement and sadness before she nodded. Raising her head, she called across the hollow. "Morningshine!"

Sky froze as the large deputy turned her broad head and tottered over. Her light yellow eyes were pools of nothing as she looked at the two she-cats.

"What is it, Darkfeather?" Questioned the deputy, her eyes flickering from the loner to the warrior. "Is there something wrong?"

Darkfeather shook her head. "Of course not, quite the opposite." She glanced over at Sky and added. "I'm going to escort Sky home, just so she's safe from any ThunderClan patrols when crossing through their territory."

Morningshine nodded, but the she-cat said nothing as she stepped to the side and padded away. Sky watched her go with questions filling her mind. Why was the deputy so ominous? Did she care? What was she hiding? Was she hiding anything?

"Sky," Darkfeather nudged her and she jumped, startled like a cat awoken from a deep sleep. "Are you ready to go?"

Sky nodded eagerly and as they headed for the camp's boulder and

bramble entrance, she gazed around at the camp who'd fostered her for the days she was injured. The warrior's den was alive with cats entering and exiting, the kits were playing outside the nursery with their mothers sharing a rabbit while watching them, and Softear was emerging from her den with Bluepaw and Shadepaw close behind. Bitterness rose like bile in her throat as she recalled her friend's earlier words and she turned away, pelt bristling with anger. Turning away from the hollow with pain ripping in her heart, she followed Darkfeather out of the camp.

"How far away is your barn, Sky?" Asked the she-cat once they'd been walking for a while. They headed down a large slope, dappled with stones and rocky outcroppings as they made their way towards ThunderClan's forest beyond the moorland.

"Just on the other side of the trees," Sky nodded to the tall trees of ThunderClan's forest. She briefly wondered how large and how far the trees stretched, but forced it down as she swallowed hard. Looking up at Darkfeather, she meowed nervously. "What will WindClan do while I'm back home?"

Darkfeather's right ear twitched at her words. "We will go on as usual." She replied and watched as Sky flinched. "But, don't worry. We won't forget you. In fact, you can visit us in greenleaf."

"Greenleaf?" Sky tipped her head to one side as the springy ground flattened as they approached the border with a rushing stream just ahead. "What's that?"

"It's when the leaves on the trees are the greenest out of all the seasons, and prey is bountiful," Darkfeather explained, and together, they hopped over the stream.

"Oh," Sky understood with a nod. "My family and I call it the warm season, because the sun heats up the inside of the barn until it gets too hot to sleep inside in the hay."

Darkfeather looked at her in curiosity. "What do you do when that happens? Sleep outside?" She asked.

Sky shook her head with a purr of amusement. "Of course not!" She

tipped her head back to the blue sky, which was clear with no clouds as the bright yellow sun beat down on the moor. "We sleep on the balconies that are dotted around the second floor of the barn. It cools us off when we sleep under the stars."

The moor runner's eyes glowed with pride and admiration. "Warriors sometimes sleep under the star of Silverpelt," she meowed and looked at Sky. "The Clans think we're closer to StarClan because of it. When really, the den can get too crowded." She added with a purr.

Sky purred with her and looked up as the red-and-white barn came into her sight. Her tired paws suddenly pricked with energy as she pricked her ears. She could hear nervous meowing and pawsteps thrumming against the ground. It was Maple!

The calico tom's paws approached with a yowl of relief. Maple didn't seem to notice Darkfeather as he threw himself at Sky, licking her ears and meowing about how much he missed her.

"Mapleclaw?" Darkfeather's mew made the tom stiffen and he raised his blue eyes to the WindClan cat. "Is that you?"

Maple nodded and flattened his shoulder fur, which bristled into spikes. "My name isn't Mapleclaw anymore, Darkfeather. It's just Maple." He rubbed Sky's head with a large paw and added in a chuckle. "Where did you find her?"

"I didn't," responded Darkfeather replied and went on explaining how Bluepaw had found her, weak and injured and in the rain. She told him about how they trekked back to the WindClan camp and stayed until her injuries were healed. "She's better now." She finished and fixed him with a confused look. "Why do you like in a barn now? What happened with you and ShadowClan?"

Maple's eyes darkened and Sky watched his fur prick with guilt. *Why is he guilty?* Sky wondered. "Poolstar exiled me when she found out I took a kittypet for a mate, and she was expecting kits." He flicked his ear to Sky. "And I do not wish to return."

Darkfeather's eyes brimmed with sadness as she dipped her head. "I

wish you never left," she murmured, loud enough for Sky to pick up the words. Straightening, the warrior added. "I need to return to my Clan. May StarClan light your path always, Maple." She caught Sky's eye and added. "And yours as well, Sky."

Sky dipped her head to the she-cat and watched her as she spun around and headed away from the two cats. "Goodbye, Darkfeather!" She called after her. "And thank you!" The she-cat flicked her tail in response as she took off, racing away until she disappeared out of sight.

Maple's eyes followed her for a moment longer before resting his tail on her back. "Come on," he meowed gently, lapping at her head with his tongue. "Let's get you home."

Chapter 3

The familiar dusty scent of the barn filled Sky's nostrils as she opened her eyes. Claws gripped her heart as she realized where she was. Marsh and Juniper were curled in a heap of fur as they snored and Cherry and Maple were sleeping in the same hay nest. Sky let out a sigh and rose to her paws, stretching luxuriously before padding out of her hay nest. Her pelt crawled with discomfort as she leaped down from the hayloft and landed heavily and she stifled a yelp.

In the few days after she returned to her family, Sky felt sorrow prick her pelt every time she remembered the cats who cared for her when she was injured. *I wish Bluepaw agreed to meet me,* she thought with a sigh. She headed out of the barn and looked over at the trees. Before she knew it, she was racing through the forest and ran towards the moorland.

Where am I going? She wondered as she exploded from the trees and headed towards the moor. Her paws skimmed over the grass as it sloped down and she skidded to a halt at the stream, panting hard and staring up at the hills. *What am I doing?* She stumbled away from the water, head spinning. *I can't go onto their territory. I'd be killed!*

"Sky?" A familiar voice caught on the wind and she looked up to see Bluepaw trotting down the slope, her blue eyes wide with surprise and concern. "What are you doing here?" Her tone wasn't threatening, but there was a hint of tension crackling in her mew.

Sky felt her muscles tense at the sight of her friend. *Are we friends?* She searched the apprentice's gaze as she came closer and nearly dropped her head in shame. "I wanted to see the sunrise," she lied.

Bluepaw's eyes sparkled with stars and Sky felt her heart lift. "I know the best place to watch it," she meowed, then looked passed the barn cat. "Are you sure? You could be caught talking to me." Worry flittered across her face and Sky purred inwardly.

"It's okay." Sky leaped across the stream and touched noses with Bluepaw, releasing a sigh she didn't know she was holding in. "I'll make it home and hunt on the way."

Bluepaw nodded and twitched her whiskers to a far rise just a few tree-lengths away. "Up there is a willow tree that's been there for generations," she meowed and started towards it, Sky on her heels. "You can get a good view on one of the branches."

Fear suddenly engulfed her heart at the thought of being high above the ground. "Is it a higher branch?" She asked hesitantly, glancing nervously at the WindClan she-cat.

To her relief, Bluepaw shook her head. "No. It's actually one of the lower branches. But," she looked over at Sky. "It is kinda high. Don't worry; no cat has fallen off or been injured for seasons."

Sky nodded, satisfied and they padded side by side in silence as they reached the top of the hill that overlooked the moor. "Wow," she breathed, staring at the vast hills and ravines. "It's amazing."

"WindClan owns it all," Bluepaw mewed proudly, puffing out her chest. "Follow me and I'll help you to the branch." Turning swiftly, she trotted to the trunk of an ancient willow tree that seemed to touch the clouds. *She wants me to climb* that? Sky thought in dismay, peering up the twisting, winding branches.

As Bluepaw approached the tree, Sky called to her. "Are you sure it's safe?" She meowed anxiously, watching as Bluepaw slid out her claws and prepared to leap at the bark. "What if you fall?"

Bluepaw looked at her over her shoulder and rolled her eyes. "You worry more than Darkfeather!" She teased and sprang at the tree, paws outstretched.

Sky's eyes widened and she let out a yelp of alarm as her friend dug her claws into the wood. She watched in fear and anxiety as Bluepaw scrambled up the trunk. *Don't fall, don't fall, don't fall!* She thought as Bluepaw slithered onto a branch, panting. Her eyes were bright as she looked down at Sky.

"See?" She meowed, tail flicking. "It wasn't so bad. You try!" Bluepaw angled her ears to the trunk and Sky hesitantly took a pace towards it. "Come on, don't be a scaredy-mouse!"

Sky glared up at her friend, determination lending her energy. "I'm not scared!" She retorted crossly and she unsheathed her claws, springing at the tree. She slammed into the trunk, claws scrabbling for a hold as she tried to go the way Bluepaw had gone. *She makes it look easy!* Seeing a dent in the wood, she sank her claws in it and hauled herself up. Bit by bit, she made it to the branch and breathed hard. *I've never climbed a tree before!* She thought as the energy faded from her limbs and she looked at Bluepaw.

"Nice job," purred the she-cat as she shuffled back to give her room to steady herself. Turning her head to the horizon, she stared across the moor, and Sky settled down beside her. "Watch."

Sky followed her gaze and felt herself shuffle closer to the apprentice. Bluepaw stiffened for a moment before she relaxed against Sky and leaned on her a bit. Sky breathed in her airy, heather scent and let out a content sigh. Her tail flicked and she felt it brush Bluepaw's tail. Trying not to be awkward, she slowly curled her tail around Bluepaw's and rested her head against her shoulder as the sun slid over the hilltops.

***

"Where have you been?" Demanded Cherry as Sky entered the barn, two squirrels dangling from her jaws by their tails. "You've been gone for hours!"

Sky felt her ears flick back in growing irritation. "I was hunting," she set the prey at her mother's paws and met her gaze, claws digging into the ground to hold her glare. "Can't you see?"

Cherry curled her lip in scorn at the squirrels. "You don't smell like the forest," she growled as she leaned forward and sniffed her daughter's pelt. "You smell like heather. Were you on the moor?"

Sky felt fear clasp her heart but she forced herself to look neutral. "I saw a rabbit and tried to catch it," she replied smoothly and leaned

down, snatching up her squirrels. "If you don't mind, I'll give these to Juniper and Marsh." She padded by her mother, feeling her rage coming off her in viscous waves as she headed for the hayloft. She had a spring in her step from watching the sunrise with Bluepaw until the sun rose higher and higher into the sky.

"This was a good idea," Bluepaw had said when they'd leaped out of the tree onto the ground. "We should do this more often." Sky recalled her friend looking incredibly shy and nervous and eventually agreed.

"Do I smell squirrel?" Meowed Marsh's excited mew as he suddenly leaped down from the hayloft. His eyes landed on the fresh-kill and his mouth watered. "Is that from ThunderClan's territory?"

Sky nodded and set the squirrels down, pushing one to her brother. "You can have this one," she purred and took the second squirrel in her jaws. "Where's Juniper?"

"I don't know," mewed Marsh as he chowed down on his squirrel. "Ask Dad."

"Don't ask Dad!" Came the amused mew of Maple from a pile of hay in the bottom corner. Sky pricked her ears and followed his voice until she found him lying on his back. "Dad doesn't know where Juniper is."

Sky purred with amusement and dropped the squirrel, nudging it towards him. "I'm sure he's just gone hunting," she guessed. "I brought you a squirrel."

"I can smell it," rumbled her father as his belly growled loud enough to shake the entire barn. He rolled over and looked hungrily down at the morsel. "Thank you." Maple leaned over and picked up the squirrel.

Sky turned away, her paws fizzled with excitement and exhaustion as she yawned. *I could sleep for a moon!* She thought as she headed for the ladder that led up to the hayloft. As she climbed, she flashed back to when she climbed up the willow tree as Bluepaw watched in silent encouragement. Her heart warmed from the memory as she

padded towards her nest, walked in a circle a few times, and closed her eyes.

Sky found herself on the moor when she opened her eyes. Her heart soared as she saw Bluepaw, Wisppaw, and Darkfeather trotting up to her. Her tail kinked high above her back as she purred a greeting.

Bluepaw came up to her, Wisppaw in tow. "Wanna race?" She asked, playfully swatting at Sky's tufted ears with sheathed claws.

"Yeah," chirped Wisppaw as she circled the two she-cats. "You love racing us!" Her head turned to Darkfeather, who purred with amusement as she watched with love and pride in her blue eyes. "Darkfeather told us that we didn't have to train today."

Bluepaw nodded eagerly. "That's right. We can do whatever we want, Skypaw!" She meowed, watching the barn cat with a sparkle in her blue eyes.

Skypaw? Sky stared in astonishment as Darkfeather met her gaze. "Skypaw?" She echoed in confusion.

Wisppaw narrowed her eyes teasingly at Sky as she shoved her shoulder with a paw. "Don't tell me you've forgotten your name, Skypaw!" She mewed and Bluepaw broke into a hearty laugh.

Darkfeather padded towards Sky and touched her nose to her forehead. "Don't you remember?" She purred softly, and Sky closed her eyes, letting the she-cat's calming, familiar scent wash over her. "Redstar made you an apprentice a moon ago when you joined WindClan."

Bluepaw rolled her eyes at her mother and gave an excited and impatient bounce. "Can't we race, now?" She looked longingly across the moor. "I bet you can't beat me to the ThunderClan border!"

Wisppaw flicked her shoulder with her tail and crouched down, claws glinting in the sunlight. "I bet I can!" She challenged and turned her blue eyes on Sky. "What do you say, Skypaw? Think you

can beat us to the border?"

"I don't think we want to find out," purred a voice, and Sky looked up to see Redstar padding towards them. The mighty leader dipped his head to Bluepaw and Wisppaw, then to Darkfeather. He faced Sky with fondness in his eyes. "I wondered where you'd gotten to, Skypaw. I wanted to speak with you."

"No!" Bluepaw burst out and faced her leader, eyes defiant, and pleading. "We were going to race to the ThunderClan border! Can't we do that first?"

Redstar purred as he shook his striped head. "I'm afraid not, little warrior." He rubbed Bluepaw's head with a white paw and watched in amusement as she protested. "Skypaw, come. We'll be back in a moment."

Sky followed the leader away from her friends as Bluepaw started bickering with Wisppaw about who was the quickest moor runner in WindClan. "What do you need, Redstar?" She asked as the leader turned and stopped in front of her.

"I wanted to tell you about something I've noticed over the last few days," he began and sat down. "I've heard reports from patrols of two cats lurking at our borders. A ginger tom with a white companion. Do you know about that?"

"That sounds like my littermates, Juniper and Marsh." Sky mewed to the leader as she shifted her weight from paw to paw. "But, why would they be hanging around the border? My parents told them to stay away from Clan cats and their territories."

Redstar's eyes glittered with unknown thoughts. "I'm not entirely sure," he admitted. "But I want you on high alert while they are around." As Sky opened her mouth to argue, Redstar held up a white paw in warning. "Even though they're your brothers, we don't know if they're hostile. Better safe than burying one of our Clanmates."

Sky dropped her gaze to her paws. "I-I guess so," she mumbled.

"Keep your chin high, Skypaw," Redstar ordered softly as he got to his paws. "If you stare at the ground, you'll miss out on the wonders beyond the grass." With that, the tom disintegrated into nothingness.

"Redstar!" Sky reached out with a paw where the leader had vanished. Spinning on her heels, she searched the moor where they'd left Darkfeather, Bluepaw, and Wisppaw but they weren't their either. Her friends had disappeared. Heart thundering in her chest, she pelted down the hill and let out a yowl of terror as the world turned black around her. "Help me!"

A voice, muffled and far away, called to her. "Sky!" It was Bluepaw and she hurried to follow her friend's desperate cry. "Sky! Sky!" She let out a wail as she was suddenly engulfed in cold. "Sky! Wake up!"

Her eyes fluttered open and she found herself panting in her nest. Her claws were ripping the stiff straw as she struggled to control her breathing. She blinked as her eyes adjusted to the gloom and she recognized Bluepaw's blue eyes watching her. "B-Bluepaw?" She scrambled to sit up and gawked at her friend, admiring her boldness. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you," she whispered and looked nervously from the hayloft to Sky. "I couldn't sleep so I thought I'd come see you. When I came, I heard growling and thrashing. Were you fighting foxes in your sleep?"

"You could say that," Sky muttered and pushed herself to her paws. "Come on; let's go somewhere more private where we won't get caught."

***

"Wait, so Morningshine had Redstar's kits?" Sky mewed, astonished as she looked sideways at her friend. Bluepaw nodded, looking as surprised as her.

"It shocked the entire Clan, not just us." Bluepaw meowed as they padded side by side through the meadow. They'd left the barn and headed the opposite direction of ThunderClan's territory so they

couldn't get caught by a passing patrol of warriors.

"What did they name the kits?" Sky asked curiously.

"Sparkkit for the red-and-white tabby she-cat, Cloverkit for the black-and-white she-cat with dark red patches, and Briarkit for the brown tabby tom," Bluepaw answered with a flick of her tail. When you left, Lakespots gave birth to three kits."

Sky's eyes widened and she shook her head in disbelief. "What did she name them?"

"Myrtlekit for the marbled blue-tabby she-cat, Parsleykit for the pale-gray tom with darker patches, and Pigeonkit for the fluffy black tom with lighter paws."

"Who's the new deputy?" Sky asked, turning her head to stare up at the moor that was growing increasingly further and further away. The sun was barely reaching over the horizon, but it provided enough light for the two cats to see.

"Sloestrike," replied Bluepaw as she yawned, showing off her pointy teeth. When she caught Sky's confused look, she went on. "He's the oldest of the senior warriors and Redstar thought it'd help to have an experienced warrior helping him out with leading WindClan."

Sky nodded, and her mind flashed back to her dream. *Should I tell her what I saw? Would she freak out and call me crazy?* She shook her head. *What she doesn't know won't hurt her.* "When are Hawkpool's kits going to be made apprentices?" She asked, thinking of Fernkit and Slatekit from the last time she saw them. They were three moons old and Sky wondered if they were going to be made into apprentices.

Bluepaw let out an airy laugh. "They're already apprentices," she purred. "Fernpaw and Slatepaw are a pawful in the apprentice's den, but we'll get used to it."

"Who are their mentors?" Sky asked, ears pricking as her friend looked over at her.

"Mothfoot is Slatepaw's mentor and Woollyfire is Fernpaw's." She

responded, her lips curling into a sneer. "Their parents wanted them to be stuck in the tunnels while the moor runners do the hard work over them. No wonder Redstar was proud to name their mentors at the ceremony."

Sky cast her friend a confused look out of the corner of her eye. "What do you mean?" She queried, taken aback at her sudden harsh tone. "If they're being trained by tunnelers, then they'll be warriors like the rest of the Clan."

Bluepaw gave her a hard stare and Sky looked down at her paws. "Tunnelers are useless when patrolling," she hissed, her blue eyes blazing. "They don't fight for their Clan in a border fight, they don't catch prey in the tunnels, the moor runners do all the work." She dug her claws into the ground as they stopped and Sky flattened her ears. *She believes what she's saying so strongly, what would the tunnelers think if they heard her talking like this?*

Sky interrupted her friend, touching her tail to her shoulder. "We'd better head back," she suggested and tipped her head back to peer at the sun as it crept up the horizon. "What would WindClan do if they found your nest empty?"

Bluepaw shrugged, the fury in her eyes fading. "You're right, let's go." Turning on her heels, Bluepaw stalked away and Sky watched glumly as her friend's tail lashed. Reluctantly, she followed, dragging her paws.

***

"Where have you been?" Sky pricked her ears and looked up as her mother's furious voice rang in the air. Cherry's eyes were blazing with undisguised anger and she lashed her tail. "It's sunhigh!"

Sky let out an irritated sigh and flicked her tail. "I went for a walk," she lied and shouldered by her mother. "I'm six moons now, I can do that." Her sharp tone made Cherry even angrier and her claws raked down her flank. Sky let out a pained yelp and swung her head around, glaring at her as blood started beading at where she was struck.

"Don't lie to me, Sky." Hissed the cherry-red tabby she-cat as she arched her back. "You smell like the forest, but there's heather on your pelt. Have you been to WindClan's territory?"

"Of course not!" Sky flashed back at her, claws pricking the earth. Anger lent her courage and she bared her teeth, spitting. "Why are you always on my tail? You're a thorn in my side every single day!" Claws raked her muzzle in response and she staggered backward, eyes wide with fury more than pain.

"What will Blackthorne and the other loners think when they find out you've been leaving the barn all the time?" Cherry spat. "They'll claw your fur off!"

"I don't care!" Sky retorted, tail lashing back and forth like a snake. "I don't care about those dumb loners! They haven't been here for moons! Why should I care about them when I hardly know them?"

Cherry launched herself at her daughter, yowling in outrage. "How dare you!" She roared. Sky narrowed her eyes and darted to the side, hissing as claws grazed her tail. "Get out of my sight! You are no longer living in the barn!"

Sky glared at her mother, meeting her blazing glare. "Fine," she snarled, flexing her claws. She knew she couldn't hurt her mother, but she knew she had to leave before she was shredded into mouse dust. "I hated it here anyways." She swung her head around and broke into a run, heading for the ThunderClan forest.

Chapter 4

Sky stalked up the hill that led into WindClan's territory. The scratches along her flank and muzzle burned like fire and she longed to rake her mother's face and shredding her ears. *I hope WindClan doesn't send me away,* she thought as she padded up the slope that overlooked the hollow where the Clan resided. *I don't know where I'll go if I do.*

She headed down towards the gulley and recognized Silversong and Lakespots guarding the hollow. She gulped as she strode towards them. Both she-cats bared their teeth but, seeing it was Sky, flattened their ruffled fur.

"What are you doing here?" Hissed Lakespots as she watched Sky through narrowed eyes. Her eyes rested on her scratches and she rose to her paws. "Come with me, I'll take you to Softear." As the moor runner led the way through the camp entrance, Sky felt her fur prickle as heads turned to stare at them.

"That's that barn cat from a few days ago," whispered Breezeblaze in Rainstream's ear as her and Lakespots passed.

"Look at her wounds," murmured Bluetail as she shared a rabbit with Logstorm. "Who did that?"

"Why is she here?" Called the hostile voice of Greenpaw as the apprentice stalked up to the two she-cats. The tom's green eyes were narrowed into slits as he stood in the way of the two cats. "You can't come in whenever you want just because Softear treated your injuries. Leave before we make you, kittypet."

Sky felt her fur bristle with indignation as she faced the apprentice. Her claws slid from their sheaths as she curled her lip in an angered snarl. "I'm *not* a kittypet, Greenpaw." She spat back.

Greenpaw sneered in her face, baring his teeth. "You live in a twoleg barn, right? You're a kittypet through and through." He

taunted.

Sky crouched down, prepared to spring at the apprentice. "I'll show you how a kittypet fights!" She hissed and sprang, claws outstretched. Greenpaw's eyes widened for a heartbeat before they narrowed and he feinted to the side and raked his claws across her flanks as she went by.

"I'll shred you with my claws sheathed!" He snickered and Sky spun around, snapping her teeth at his tail. Greenpaw yelped and reared on his hind legs, swatting at her ears.

Sky snarled and sank her teeth into his forepaw. The anger and betrayal from her argument with Cherry flooded her veins and a red haze blocked her vision. She dug her hind claws into the ground as she reared up, slashing at Greenpaw's face as she yowled in defiance and anger.

Paws slammed into her side and she was thrown clear from Greenpaw and she hit the ground with a *thud* before scrambling to her paws. The red haze vanished and she breathed hard as Greenpaw let out a wail of pain, his paws covering his face.

"M-My eyes!" He cried in agony. "I-I can't see!"

"Sky!" Bluepaw's voice dragged the she-cat from her feelings of horror and she looked up, seeing the she-cat hurrying towards her. Bluepaw pressed against her side as Bluetail led a whimpering Greenpaw into Softear's den. "What are you doing here?"

"She can tell us later, Bluepaw." Meowed Redstar as he came out of his den, fur ruffled as though he were mid-groom. "Take her to Softear then bring her into my den. I'm sure you're hungry Sky, but we have much to discuss."

Sky nodded feebly to the leader as he turned to Sloestrike as the deputy jogged up, glaring at the loner. Bluepaw rasped her tongue over Sky's ears as she guided her after Greenpaw and Bluetail.

"That was quite the move," the apprentice whispered as they limped inside. Sky saw Greenpaw lying pitifully in a nest lined with sheep

wool. She felt a pang of satisfaction as he whimpered in pain while Shadepaw applied cobwebs. "Who taught you that?"

"No one," Sky answered in a hushed mew. "It was just instinct, I guess." Bluepaw led her to a nest and looked her over, nosing her from ears to tail tip.

"He got your flank pretty good, I'll give him that." Bluepaw mewed as she sniffed the scratches running down her side. "Your ears are bleeding, and there are small cuts. You'll be fine."

"We'll see about that, Bluepaw," meowed Softear as she slid into the den, a wad of green in her jaws. She looked from Shadepaw and Greenpaw to Bluepaw and Sky. Her eyes widened at the sight of the loner but she masked her surprise as she approached. "What happened?"

As Bluepaw went on to explain what happened in the clearing, Softear sniffed her side and chewed the leaves, letting the juices sink into Sky's wounds. Sky winced, digging her claws into the ground as she gritted her teeth. As cobwebs were plastered to her flanks, she looked at Bluepaw.

Shadepaw lumbered over, his eyes distrustful as he glanced at Sky then to his mentor. "Greenpaw's eyes will be fine, but he's in a lot of pain." He reported as Softear checked Sky's shoulder. "I gave him a poppy seed to help him sleep and he can eat when he wakes up."

"Good job, Shadepaw." Softear mewed over her shoulder as she took a pace back, looking at her work with pride in her eyes. "You'll be fine, Sky. You'd better go see what Redstar wants with you before he claws your ears off."

"I'll do it for him," groaned Greenpaw as his ears flattened. Sky could tell the poppy seed was working as his words were slurred. "Useless kittypet." He mumbled and fell asleep.

Bluepaw rolled her eyes and nudged Sky to her paws. "Come on," she chirped and pranced to the den's incline. "Let's go see what Redstar wants from you."

"Nothing bad, I hope," Sky muttered as she followed her friend out of the den.

***

Bluepaw bounded over to Sky as she left Redstar's den, her wounds burning like fire. "What did he say?" She asked as Sky padded numbly to the prey heap. As she picked a hare from the pile, she and Bluepaw dragged it to a small rise and tucked in.

Sky's mind was filled with Redstar's words. The invite to join the Clan and be an apprentice was so overwhelming, she'd been speechless when the leader suggested it. *I can be in a Clan, just like my father!* She thought with glee before something hardened in her belly. *I'll be in a Clan and won't be able to see my family again.*

"Sky?" Bluepaw prodded her with a paw and she looked up, the hare untouched. "What did Redstar say?" She pressed and took a bite of the fresh-kill.

"He-He said..." Sky trailed off. *How can I say that Redstar wants me to join WindClan? Even after Greenpaw and I's fight?* She shook herself, determined to give her an answer without looking sheepish. She took a breath and faced her friend. "He said he wants me to join the Clan."

Bluepaw's eyes stretched as wide as a moon and she let out a *mrrow* of joy. "That's great!" She meowed and leaped to her paws before dropping into a crouch. "We can train together, fight together, to be the best warriors in WindClan!" She circled Sky, her eyes bright with excitement. "I wonder who your mentor will be. Rabbitspring wouldn't be chosen, Rippleblaze sounds cool, Rainstream!"

Sky purred as her friend rambled on and on about who could be her mentor as she ate. *If this is what being in a Clan is like, then I'll stay.* She thought as she contently ate and watched Bluepaw. *I don't know why Maple ever wanted to leave.*

***

"Hold still, Jayfang!" Sky complained as she pressed the mouse bile

on his tick. "I can't get it off if you keep moving around like a rambunctious kit!" The tick let go of the blind elder with a *pop!* and Sky took it between her teeth and crushed it, spitting the foul taste of the bile onto the ground.

Robinfoot, one of the oldest elders, purred in amusement as Jayfang let out a groan. "He's a stubborn old tom," she chuckled and turned her warm green eyes onto Sky. "You'll get used to fussing about him not staying still once you become an apprentice."

Jayfang curled his lip at his denmate, but his blind blue eyes betrayed a fondness that took Sky by surprise. "You're just lucky you don't have ticks, Robinfoot!" He spat and flicked his ear.

A low, rumbling chuckle came from Whiskertail as the elder lounged on his back, bathing in the sunlight that filtered into the den from the entrance. "I have one of my shoulder," he mewed to Sky, a sympathetic gleam in his yellow eyes. "Could you get it for me? I can't reach it."

Sky rose to her paws as Jayfang rolled onto his back with an exaggerated grunt. "Of course, Whiskertail." She purred and padded towards the elder. The mouse bile smelled and tasted foul and Sky never knew why the medicine cats had it in the first place. *Ticks can come off without it.* She thought as she searched through Whiskertail's shoulder fur and found the fat black tick nuzzled into his shoulder. She smothered the foul insect with the bile and pulled it out.

At once, Whiskertail's shoulders relaxed and he let out a purr. "That feels much better," he meowed. "We might have to keep you around, Sky. You pull out ticks faster than Bluepaw, Greenpaw, and Wisppaw!"

Though his remark was kind, Sky couldn't help but feel a twinge of worry as she looked outside the den. The elder's resided in the most sheltered area of the hollow. It was a hollowed-out cave in the far right corner of the camp and Sky couldn't help but love the den for unknowable reasons.

"When is your naming ceremony, Sky?" Robinfoot asked as she

pricked her ears towards the she-cat. "I thought Redstar would've held it by now. After all, it's been a few days."

Sky looked over at the elderly she-cat and shrugged. "It's his decision when I'm named an apprentice." She replied and couldn't help but look outside the den. *When* was *Redstar planning on making me an apprentice?* She wondered as she felt a stab of irritation and restlessness.

Jayfang suddenly sat up, his ears twitching. The movement alarmed Sky and she spun around, gazing at the elder. "I smell something," he declared.

Whiskertail rolled his yellow eyes. "You smell WindClan," he joked and closed his eyes, letting out a yawn.

Sky tasted the air in the stuffy den. She could smell rabbit, the familiar scent of WindClan's camp and cats, dust, and something else. Her claws plucked at the earth as she struggled to place her paw on the scent.

Jayfang let out a hiss and sprang to his paws, fur rippling along his spine. "It's ThunderClan!" He spat and unsheathed his claws.

"ThunderClan?" Robinfoot looked at her denmate in surprise. "What are you-" A shriek of warning cut the she-cat off and Sky pricked her ears as snarling was coming from outside the den.

Sky hurried out of the den and saw WindClan cats grappling with leaf-smelling cats. She let out a yowl of warning as she saw Wisppaw being pulled to the ground by a large silver tabby she-cat. Claws unsheathing, she stood at the entrance of the elder's den, prepared to defend the elders.

A white she-cat with gray patches raced towards her, snarling and baring her teeth. Sky braced herself as the cat slammed into her, knocking her off her paws. She wrestled furiously with the patched she-cat, digging her claws into her side and sinking her teeth into her fluffy leg.

The she-cat let out a hiss of pain and twisted, writhing on the

ground as Sky struggled to pin her down. Agony flared in her chest as claws struck through her fur and raked her flesh. Raising a paw, she landed blow after blow onto her belly.

Something landed on her back and claws ripped at her shoulders, dragging her away from the she-cat. Sky let out a yowl of pain and fury as she spun around, lashing out wildly with her claws. Her claws lanced through fur and struck home as she raked a yellow tabby tom with black stripes on his cheek.

"Get off her, you mangy worm!" Snarled the voice of Jayfang and Sky saw out of the corner of her eye as the elder launched himself at the yellow tom. Thrown clear away from Sky, Jayfang locked into battle with the younger cat, who was taken aback that the elder would fight.

"Sky!" Whiskertail yowled as he and Robinfoot battered the white she-cat's ears. "Help protect the nursery!"

Sky nodded and took off, rounding a boulder and skidding to a halt as Bluepaw ran up to her. Her friend had a nick in her left ear and was bleeding from her shoulder, but her eyes were bright with fire.

"Where's Darkfeather?" Bluepaw yowled over the sound of battle.

"I don't know," Sky scanned the camp, trying to find the nursery. "Come on! We have to defend the nursery!"

Bluepaw nodded, spun around on her heels, and took off. Sky followed, hot on her heels as she led the way to a rocky outcropping that was sheltered by brambles and thorns. At the entrance, Nutfoot and Lakespots were clawing the top of a gray tom's head, and Morningshine was slashing at a fluffy cream she-cat.

"They don't need help," Sky growled and watched as the gray tom yelped in pain before whipping around and running toward the camp entrance. His two Clanmates followed soon after.

"Cats of ThunderClan!" Redstar's voice boomed through the hollow,

echoing off the rocky walls and each den. Slowly, the fighting began to cease until a few skirmishes were going on. "Let this be a lesson to all of you!" Redstar threw the limp body of a golden tabby she-cat forward and a gasp came from the stunned ThunderClan warriors.

"S-Sunwatcher!" A pale-ginger she-cat watched in horror. "N-No!"

"You killed my deputy!" Spat a burly red-brown tabby tom as he glared hatefully up at the WindClan leader. "How dare you!"

Sky dug her claws into the earth as she retorted. "You attacked our camp!" The tabby tom whirled on her, teeth bared and eyes screwed up as blood trickled into one. "You nearly killed our elders!"

"And who are you?" The tom snarled and narrowed his eyes at her. "You aren't any WindClan cat I've ever seen."

Redstar let out a growl. "That's Skypaw, Copperstar." He bounded toward the ThunderClan tom and shoved his face close to Copperstar's. "I suggest you leave unless you want more of your warriors to die."

Copperstar returned Redstar's stare and drew himself up, pelt bristling. "Very well, Redstar." He spat and glared around at the WindClan warriors. "This isn't over, we will have our revenge!"

Morningshine stepped forward, the cries of the kits in the nursery ringing into the hollow. "We'll be waiting with our claws unsheathed." She growled. "Leave. Now."

Copperstar grunted but said nothing more as he whisked his tail and stalked away, passing by Sky. "If I ever see your face again," he snarled as he went by. "I'll shred you to mouse dust."

Sky arched her back in reply. "Go ahead and try it, Copperstar." She snapped back. "I'll rip out your throat before you can unsheathe your claws."

Copperstar shoved by and, his Clan in tow, shuffled out of the WindClan camp.

"Are any cats dead?" Softear's voice cut through the tense silence as the ThunderClan cats left. "Any serious injuries?"

"Jayfang has a bite on his leg that looks pretty bad," called Robinfoot from the elder's den. Jayfang was lying on his side, wheezing and spluttering as Shadepaw hurried over.

"I don't think any other cats have worse injuries," meowed Driftbird as she limped towards Softear. "If we do, I think ThunderClan has it worse."

Redstar met Sky's gaze as he hopped onto his tree trunk den and let out a yowl. "The newcomer has proved her worth and skill in battle in fighting with us against ThunderClan!" Beside Sky, Bluepaw pricked up, eyes gleaming. "In doing so, she risked her life and her pelt for cats she did not grow up around. Sky, please come forward."

Sky sheathed her claws and stumbled forward, suddenly aware of the cats staring at her in curiosity. *Is he finally going to make me an apprentice?* She looked up at the leader and saw hope and burning pride in his eyes.

"Sky, you came to us injured and in the rain for the first time. You also came back in the same way, but I invited you into the Clan as an apprentice." The leader dipped his head. "Sky, until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Skypaw. Darkfeather, you are a patient and wise moor runner and I know that you will teach Skypaw everything she needs to know to be a loyal WindClan warrior."

Out of the corner of her eye, Skypaw saw Darkfeather step forward, eyes shining as she limped towards her new apprentice. Skypaw noted that her mentor looked battered but proud as she touched noses with Skypaw.

"Skypaw!" Bluepaw's voice rose over the silent Clan and Skypaw smiled gratefully at her friend.

Robinfoot and Whiskertail took up the cheer. "Skypaw! Skypaw!" Soon, the entire Clan joined in, their cheers ringing in Skypaw's

ears.

"Skypaw! Skypaw! Skypaw!"

Skypaw held her head high and soaked in the cheers, despite her wounds stinging like fury. When the Clan dispersed to get their injuries treated, Bluepaw wove around Skypaw, her eyes bright and tail high above her back.

"I can't believe it!" The she-cat exclaimed. "Darkfeather is your mentor now! We can train together!"

Skypaw purred and pricked her ears as her new mentor approached. "Hi, Darkfeather," she twitched her tail at the warrior. "What are we going to do first?"

Darkfeather blinked fondly at the two apprentices and flicked her ear to where a line was forming outside the medicine cat's tunnel. "Get your wounds treated, eat, rest, and we'll start tomorrow morning with a tour around the territory."

Bluepaw's eyes fixated on her mother. "Can I come with you tomorrow?" She asked. "Brackenmist would want me to come along, right?"

Darkfeather looked down at her daughter, whiskers twitching in slight amusement. "Why don't you ask him first?" She suggested. "I'm sure he'd let you if you asked nicely." Bluepaw's eyes widened and she darted off, heading for the direction of Softear's den. When she left, Darkfeather looked at Skypaw. "Are you excited to be an apprentice?"

Skypaw nodded eagerly, her tail flicking happily. "I can't wait to start my training!" She mewed and fluffy up her fur. "How old does a kit have to be in order to become an apprentice?"

"Six moons," replied her mentor as she waved her tail. "You haven't missed out on much since leaving the Clan the first time. Off you go, then," she meowed and nudged her towards Softear's den. "Get your injuries treated."

Skypaw nodded and trotted off without arguing. Her pelt felt hot

with pain as her wounds acted up and she stood behind Finchsong and Driftbird. Both tunnelers seemed unaware of her presence, and Skypaw felt grateful. Determination hardened in her chest as she licked at the scratches on her shoulder. She would prove herself to be the best apprentice WindClan had ever seen. And she knew not even Greenpaw could get in her way.

Chapter 5

"Wake up, lazybones," Skypaw blinked open her eyes and saw Bluepaw watching her, amusement twinkling in her blue eyes. "Did you forget you're an apprentice now? Darkfeather wants us to eat before we go on the tour of the territory."

Skypaw blinked a few more times as her eyes adjusted to the gloom of the apprentice's cave. Wisppaw was still sleeping in her nest and Skypaw felt a pang of envy as she watched her flanks rise and fall rhythmically. She pushed herself to her paws and followed her friend out of the den. Her belly growled at the fresh scent of fresh-kill and she pricked her ears. *I could sleep for a moon!* She felt sore and battered from the day before and she dragged her tail behind her.

Bluepaw trotted beside her, eyes bright with excitement. "I can't wait to show you the territory!" She meowed and looked over at Skypaw. "Are you excited?"

Skypaw nodded, tiredness clawing at her paws until she thought she would fall asleep while she was standing. They headed for the prey-heap and Bluepaw hooked her claws around a plump hare and pushed it toward Skypaw. As they ate, Darkfeather and Brackenmist padded up to them.

"Good morning, you two," purred Brackenmist as he looked warmly at the two apprentices. "How does the rabbit taste, Skypaw?" He asked, blinking at the fresh-kill.

Skypaw swallowed her bite and looked up at the honey-brown tabby tom. "Delicious," she meowed and took another bite. "It tastes like heather."

Brackenmist and Darkfeather purred with amusement. "I assure you," he twitched his whiskers. "Rabbits caught on the moor aren't made of heather. If they were, they'd be unfit to eat."

Darkfeather chuckled and looked warmly at Bluepaw. "Are you all ready to go?" She questioned.

Bluepaw took a few more quick bites and rose to her paws, still chewing. "In a second," she meowed, her voice muffled by the prey. She swallowed the bites and Skypaw took a few bites of her own. "Where will we go first?"

"I was thinking Outlook Hill, then to the Hunting Plains, and the SkyClan border." Brackenmist looked at Darkfeather out of the corner of his light blue eyes. "How does that sound to you?"

Darkfeather blinked at the moor runner, her eyes soft. "Sounds good to me," she responded warmly. Skypaw and Bluepaw shared a confused look before finishing the rest of the rabbit off quickly.

"Can we go now?" Skypaw asked, her paws suddenly itching to see the rest of the territory. "I want to see the territory!"

Both mentors looked amused and Brackenmist trotted toward the camp entrance. "Let's go then!" He called over his shoulder.

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Skypaw followed the two moor runners up a steep slope that was dappled with pebbles and boulders. Her paws ached from the walk but she forced herself to hold her tongue to keep from complaining. *You aren't a kit anymore. You're an apprentice training to defend WindClan from attackers.* Gritting her teeth against the pain, she forced herself on.

Ahead of her, Brackenmist and Darkfeather were chatting about something and Skypaw looked over at Bluepaw, who looked just as tired as she was. *She's not used to walking this much,* she guessed as the ground slowly started to flatten as they reached the top of the hill. The blazing sun beat down on their backs, warming the moorlands until Skypaw thought the sandy grass would catch on fire.

"We're here," Brackenmist announced as he halted, tail-lengths from the edge of the hill that sloped down again. He looked over at

Skypaw as she and Bluepaw padded up. "This is Outlook Hill, where you'll be trained and assessed on your sight."

"That part of your training won't start until you've gotten the hang of hunting and fighting on the open moor." Darkfeather put in as she overlooked the moor that stretched on for forever. "Over there is SkyClan territory." She nodded to the left where the hills flattened and the green of grass marked the border. Trees as tall as mountains loomed over the ground. "They're woodland hunters who can jump higher than a rabbit."

"And over there," Brackenmist blinked to the stunted oak trees across the stream that looked so small from the hill. "Is ThunderClan's territory. They're like SkyClan but with more oak trees and climb trees instead of jumping."

Bluepaw purred with amusement as she whispered in Skypaw's ear. "They're too lazy to jump up to get their prey."

Skypaw giggled. "Are SkyClan, WindClan, and ThunderClan the only Clans?" She asked, looking around the lake that marked the center of the land.

On the other side of Brackenmist, Darkfeather shook her head. "No, there are two others. RiverClan and ShadowClan border ThunderClan and SkyClan. But," she looked over to Skypaw. "They don't border us so they aren't our problem."

Brackenmist snorted. "Sometimes, they try to cause trouble and we'll have to cross the territory and teach them a lesson." His ears waved in the wind as it ruffled their fur. "But those times are as rare as us eating forest prey." He chuckled and it caught on the wind. "Come on, there's more territory to see."

Skypaw turned around and followed Brackenmist as Bluepaw fell into step beside her. "How big is the lake?" She asked her friend as they made their way down the slope.

Bluepaw shrugged. "I'm not entirely sure, to be honest I'll ask Brackenmist." She replied and jogged ahead to fall in beside her mentor and they began to discuss the lake and the territories."

Fur brushed against her as Darkfeather took her daughter's place. "How are you liking the tour so far, Skypaw?" She asked, her tone light.

"It's amazing," Skypaw breathed, suddenly breathless from the observation from Outlook Hill. "I never knew one Clan owned so much land."

Darkfeather's eyes sparkled like dew on lush green grass in the early morning as she stared across the fields and hills. "WindClan has owned this territory for generations going back to the time of Firestar." She meowed and Skypaw's ears pricked.

"Who's Firestar?" She asked curiously.

"Was," her mentor correctly softly as her eyes flooded with memories. "Firestar led ThunderClan many, many seasons ago and his name is nearly forgotten. He was respected like any other Clan leader, but he wasn't born into the Clans."

"He joined ThunderClan," the apprentice guessed as they followed Brackenmist and Bluepaw as they led them towards a large field of boulders and rocks.

Darkfeather's eyes glistened with memory and Skypaw blinked. Why was her mentor acting like this Firestar cat was such a big deal? "Firestar was a kittypet named Rusty before he joined ThunderClan as Firepaw, apprentice to Whitestorm, Lionheart, and Tigerclaw at first until Bluestar took her on as his apprentice. When time went on, Fireheart exposed Tigerclaw as being a traitor when he tried to kill Bluestar and rose to become Firestar.

"Firestar's daughters, Squirrelflight and Leafpool are key in the Clans' history. It was Brambleclaw, Squirrelflight, Stormfur, Feathertail, Crowpaw, and Tawnypelt who led us to the lake and we've lived here ever since." As Darkfeather concluded the story, they reached the rocky field and Skypaw bounded to Brackenmist's side.

"Where are we?" She asked curiously.

"Hunting Plains," replied the tabby mentor as he flicked his tail. "The story goes is that the stream was once a roaring river that washed these stones up here." He gestured with his paw to the rocks around them. "Rabbits and field mice often hide among the boulders and in greenleaf, prey is plentiful."

Bluepaw chimed in with her tail high above her back and blue eyes shining. "During greenleaf, we eat so much, we start to become a little slower." Brackenmist and Darkfeather purred with amusement. "But, we'll always be the fastest runners in the Clans no matter what the other cats say!"

Skypaw mewed in agreement and yawned. "Can we go back?" She asked, trying her best not to sound rude. Her paws ached and she felt like she could fall asleep standing up.

Darkfeather nodded and looked over at Brackenmist, who was talking to Bluepaw about the stream. "Are we ready to head back?" She queried, her ears flicking.

Brackenmist nodded as he kept speaking to his apprentice. "Go ahead, we'll catch up." He meowed over his shoulder.

Darkfeather nodded and with Skypaw at her side, led the way back to the WindClan hollow.

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"Welcome back, Skypaw!" Wisppaw called as the returning cats slid through the gorse and brambles to enter the camp. The gray she-cat bounded across the hollow and touched noses with her denmates. "How was it? Did you see Outlook Hill?"

Skypaw nodded, her paws so numb she thought they would fall off. She turned to Darkfeather, who was greeting Breezeblaze. "Are we doing anything else today?"

Getting her mentor's attention, Darkfeather shook her head. "Tomorrow we'll start with some hunting practice and work on that until sunhigh. Then, we'll do a bit of battle training." Skypaw opened her mouth to say she could fight but Darkfeather raised a

paw, her eyes stern. "You fight well, but you also fight like a rogue. In order to be a WindClan cat, you must fight like a WindClan cat." Without letting Skypaw respond, Darkfeather, Brackenmist, and Breezeblaze padded away.

Skypaw dug her claws into the ground, irritated. She could fight better than any cat! She knew she could take on Greenpaw and win quickly, but was Darkfeather right? Did she fight like a rogue?

"Skypaw!" Wisppaw nudged her shoulder with her nose and nodded to where Bluepaw was waving her paw at the prey-heap. "Come on, let's get something big enough to share." As she trotted toward Bluepaw, Skypaw followed, a new energy flooding through her.

"What are you doing tomorrow, Wisppaw?" Skypaw asked as she helped Bluepaw haul the largest rabbit she'd ever seen to the small incline and took a bite.

Wisppaw sat down and groaned. "Quailfeather wants me on dawn patrol," she complained and snatched a bite of the rabbit. She chewed, swallowed, and went on. "After that, I'll have to help around camp and check on Greenpaw."

Bluepaw sat back on her haunches and studied Wisppaw. "How is he doing?" She asked, her tail tip flicking back and forth as they ate.

"He's doing better since you scratched his eyes," the gray apprentice shot her a grateful and playful look. "Couldn't you have blinded him? It would've helped us becoming warriors sooner than him."

Though her friend was teasing, Skypaw could tell she was worried for her denmate. Greenpaw was a strong tom, she knew, but would he succumb to his injuries? Would he be able to see even though Wisppaw said he wasn't?

They ate in silence for a few heartbeats until Bluepaw broke it.

"How old are Woolkit and Fawnkit?" She asked, suddenly perking up as she stared across the camp. Skypaw followed her gaze to the nursery where two fluffy kits were pestering Rabbitspring about something.

While Skypaw shrugged and took another bite of rabbit, Wisppaw looked thoughtfully over at the kits. "I think they're almost six moons old," she guessed and rolled onto her back, paws flexing in the air. "But, what do I know? I'm not their mother or father."

Skypaw purred with amusement as her friend stretched each leg. "But they'll be apprentices with us soon enough," she pointed out.

"The apprentice's den is crowded enough already," complained Bluepaw as she shot Skypaw a glance. "Even with Greenpaw in Softear's den, Fernpaw and Slatepaw take up so much room!"

Skypaw couldn't help but agree as she nodded. Fernpaw and Slatepaw had already made bigger nests despite being apprenticed a day or so before Skypaw. "When we're warriors, they'll probably get their names with us."

Wisppaw and Bluepaw groaned together. "That's just perfect." Wisppaw mewed, her voice a sarcastic groan. She rolled over and bounced to her paws, letting out a small yawn. "I'm going to turn in for the night, you guys coming too?"

Skypaw shook her head as Bluepaw nodded. When the other two apprentices looked at her curiously, she shrugged. "I don't feel like going to sleep just yet." It wasn't an entire lie, but it wasn't the whole truth either. As her friends bid her goodnight and headed for the apprentice's den, Skypaw sat back on her haunches and stared up at the starry night sky.

The stars dappled the sky like a tortoiseshell's pelt and she let out a sigh, her shoulders relaxing. How were her family doing? Did Marsh and Juniper care she had to leave and join WindClan? What about Maple? Did he miss her as much as she missed him?

"I hope however you're doing," she whispered under her breath to the open sky. "You're thinking of me."

Chapter 6

Skypaw crouched down as she narrowed her eyes at the rabbit, her claws unsheathing slowly to not alert her bounty. *Be calm.* She thought as she fought to stay still. *Make Darkfeather proud.* She let out a soft sigh and crept forward as the rabbit's big ears flicked back and forth. With a mighty heave, she launched herself forward and showered sand behind her. Stretching out her front paws, she sank her claws into the rabbit's hind legs and drew it towards her chest, killing it with a single bite to the neck. The rabbit fell limp at her paws.

"Good catch, Skypaw!" Cheered Wisppaw as her and Bluepaw trotted up to her, their eyes shining with excitement and pride. "That rabbit didn't see you coming!"

"Yeah!" Bluepaw sniffed at the prey and looked up at Skypaw. "You nearly showered me with sand."

Skypaw licked her chest fur, embarrassed. "Sorry, I just wanted to get the rabbit as quick as possible." She meowed and looked at her friends. She'd been with the Clan for nearly a moon and she'd already mastered hunting but struggled to adapt to how the WindClan cats fought. It was strange having rules to let your opponent have a chance to flee when you could deal more damage. Skypaw wondered if it was a good idea to join the Clan when she had to obey more and more rules.

"What are you guys doing for the rest of the day?" Skypaw asked, looking between her friends.

Wisppaw answered before Bluepaw. "Quailfeather wants to see how fast I can run to the ThunderClan border," she mewed with an excited flick of her ears.

Bluepaw twitched her whiskers. "Brackenmist wants to take me hunting then patrolling the SkyClan border." She looked at Skypaw. "What about you?"

Skypaw shrugged. "I don't know," she meowed earnestly. "Darkfeather hasn't told me what we're going to do for the rest of the day."

"From what I heard," Wisppaw licked a paw and started to wash her ears. "Greenpaw is fit to start training again. There are three scars across his face, but he'll live."

"That's horrible," Bluepaw joked and nudged Skypaw. "Get your prey and let's head back to camp. We should check with our mentors." She meowed and rose to her paws.

***

"Softear!" Skypaw's ears pricked as she and her friends slipped inside the camp. The cry came from Finchsong as she burst into the camp, dripping wet with mud and water. She reeked of dung and Skypaw screwed up her nose.

The cats who were in the camp had heard the commotion and pricked their ears, murmuring amongst themselves.

"Finchsong?" Thrushleaf hurried to the tunneler's side, eyes worried and concerned. "What's the matter? Where are Driftbird and Wollyfire?"

Skypaw felt her fur bristle and she shared a worried look with Bluepaw before padding forward. The rabbit felt heavy in her jaws and she dropped it, panting. "What's going on?" She asked, striding to the tunneler's muddy side. "What happened?"

Finchsong turned to look at Skypaw and her horrified look made her blood run cold. "Th-there was a cave-in," she spluttered and coughed. "I-I was the first one out but I don't know if Wollyfire and Driftbird made it out."

Skypaw felt her tail bush out behind her and she looked over her shoulder at Bluepaw and Wisppaw. Bluepaw looked as shocked and horrified as Finchsong. Wisppaw's eyes were so wide, Skypaw feared they'd pop out of her head.

"What's going on?" The mew of Sloestrike startled Skypaw as the

deputy strode up to them, his eyes concerned and serious. "Finchsong? Where's the rest of your patrol?"

As Finchsong tumbled out words that meant nothing to Skypaw, Sloestrike's eyes grew wide and he blinked. He mewed something quietly to the clearly shocked she-cat and she heads off, being followed by Thrushleaf.

Sloestrike raised his voice and started dishing out orders. "I want Wolfleaf, Mothfoot, and Hawkpool to come with me." He meowed and twitched his ear to Bluepaw. "Where is your mentor?"

Bluepaw blinked in surprise at being addressed by the deputy. When Wisppaw murmured in her ear, she replied. "Brackenmist is out on patrol with Quailfeather by the SkyClan border." She answered with a confused look at Skypaw.

Sloestrike nodded and gathered the tunnelers he named and hurried out of the camp. Skypaw watched as Mothfoot's tail disappeared and she looked at her friends.

"I hope every cat is okay," Wisppaw meowed worriedly as she padded up to Skypaw, Bluepaw in tow carrying Skypaw's rabbit. "I wonder what caused the cave-in."

Skypaw shrugged, a sliver of worry creeping into her chest. "Probably something with the tunnels," she meowed and angeled her ears to the prey-heap. "We should dump the rabbit off and relax." She suggested and headed for their spot on the hill. Soon, the three she-cats were washing their fur and making some small conversation.

Bluepaw twisted her head and lapped at her shoulder fur. "Are you guys excited for the Gathering?" She asked suddenly.

Skypaw looked up from washing her tail in confusion. "What's a Gathering?" She questioned, frowning.

Wisppaw shared an amused look with Bluepaw before she turned to Skypaw from where she basked on a smooth stone. "A Gathering is when all four Clans get together at the island in the middle of the

lake every moon and share news." She explained.

"Yeah," Bluepaw agreed with a nod. "That's also where we learn our enemies' weaknesses. It's used to our advantage in order to discover what happens in other Clans to see if they're weak."

Skypaw blinked, suddenly wondering what the cats from the other Clans looked like. "Why does it occur every moon?" She asked, gazing curiously at her friends. "Why not every two or three moons?"

Bluepaw giggled and sent a looked over her shoulder where Jayfang, Whiskertail, and Robinfoot were sharing tongues outside their den. Jayfang's injuries were healed and Skypaw felt grateful that nothing bad happened after the fight with ThunderClan. "Because some elders can't keep gossip amongst themselves." She snickered.

"And some apprentices can't hold their tongues," Whiskertail meowed loudly and twitched his ears in the direction of the three apprentices.

Bluepaw and Wisppaw ducked their heads, laughing quietly amongst themselves as Whiskertail flicked his tail playfully. "But," they turned to Skypaw again. "It's also nice to see what friends you make during a Gathering."

"Although," Wisppaw added quickly. "It's strictly forbidden by the warrior code to not be too friendly with cats outside your own Clan." She straightened and her eyes gleamed.

"Why?" Skypaw asked, confused.

"Because it could lead to cats from other Clans to being mates," Bluepaw explained as she shot a look at Wisppaw. She leaned forward and whispered in Skypaw's ear. "Every cat thinks forbidden relationships are so bad, but they usually give a Clan more kits."

Skypaw pictured two cats from rival Clans having kits and screwed up her face. "Why is it so bad when more warriors will be born?" She asked, looking at Bluepaw.

Pawsteps came from behind them and Skypaw turned to see Greenpaw stalking up to them, his eyes dark with shadows.

"Because it exposes a weakness in both Clans that their cats are disloyal," growled the gray-and-white tom as he glared at Skypaw. "Cats with mixed blood have mixed loyalties and cannot be trusted to defend their Clan."

Skypaw felt her fur prickle as he pinned his eyes on her. "Not every half-Clan cat is disloyal as you say, Greenpaw." She argued, trying to keep her fur flat and voice calm. Bluepaw and Wisppaw glanced at her, suddenly interested. "My father left ShadowClan and fell in love with my mother and she gave birth to me and my littermates. Yet, I am not disloyal to WindClan at all."

Greenpaw snorted in contempt. "Yeah, right," he sneered and Skypaw's claws pricked the earth as her eyes narrowed into slits. "How do we know you aren't sneaking away to see some ThunderClan or SkyClan cat, sharing our secrets?" He challenged, his voice hostile.

Bluepaw and Wisppaw brushed against either side of Skypaw and glared at the tom. "Come on, Greenpaw." Scoffed Bluepaw as she glared sharply at Greenpaw. "Do you really think Skypaw would betray us after we've helped her?"

"Yeah," Wisppaw narrowed her eyes at her littermate. "You have such a grudge against her for no reason. Grow up, you're an apprentice now. We're training to become warriors!"

Greenpaw bared his teeth at his sister. "She's a kittypet!" He hissed and Skypaw bristled in anger. He turned his green glare on her and shoved his face close to hers. "You may have manipulated Redstar, Darkfeather, Brackenmist, Bluepaw, and Wisppaw that you are loyal to WindClan." He snarled. "But you haven't fooled me." With a hiss, he spun around and stalked away, tail lashing back and forth.

Wisppaw snorted and watched her brother leave. "What's got his tail in a twist?" She growled, her ears flicking in irritation.

Skypaw forced her fur to lie flat and shrugged, still unnerved by

Greenpaw's words. "Who knows?"

"The patrol is back!" Gorseflower's call made Skypaw stiffen and the three apprentices hurried to the edge of the hill that overlooked the camp. Cats were streaming into the hollow, led by Sloestrike, who was soaked in mud.

"Great StarClan!" Exclaimed Bluepaw as she stared in awe.

"Sloestrike!" Redstar jogged out of his den, Morningshine on his heels. Skypaw guessed their kits were sleeping in the nursery. "You're soaked! What happened?"

Sloestrike fought to catch his breath as the cats behind him filed into the camp after the deputy. "There was a cave-in by the river at SkyClan's border," he panted.

Skypaw tuned out the deputy as he talked to Redstar. She spotted a stranger among the tunnelers. Their pelt was red-brown and their eyes were a lighter hazel. "Who's that?" She asked Bluepaw, pointing to the newcomer with a paw.

Bluepaw shrugged beside her and Skypaw could feel her muscles rippling against her side. "All I know is that they'll be licking mud out of their pelts for days."

Skypaw was already making her way down the slope to the red-brown cat who she noticed was a she-cat. "Hello," she meowed. "Who are you?"

The she-cat jumped and looked at her in surprise and slight defiance. "My name means nothing to you, you bone-eating rats!" She hissed, her muddy fur bristling angrily.

Skypaw took a step back, shocked. "What?" Her eyes flashed and she blinked at the she-cat. "Of course names mean something to us." She flicked her tail in confusion. Why was this she-cat acting so hostile?

The cat growled. "Get away from me, you retched cat. I know what you Clan cats have done to kittypets and loners like me. You shred their ears and claw their ears when they're trying to survive just like

you." She turned away from Skypaw, pelt bristling.

Skypaw took a few paces back, her ears flattening to her head as she hissed. "You are the most ungrateful cat I've ever met!" She turned away from the she-cat and stormed back to Bluepaw and Wisppaw.

"What was that about?" Wisppaw questioned as she looked over Skypaw's shoulder at the red-brown she-cat.

"She tried to shred my ears for simply asking her name," Skypaw grumbled as she reached her friends. "Any cat would think she has thorns in her rear!"

Bluepaw snorted as she waved a paw dismissively. "Typical rogues trying to be tough after being saved by us." She meowed and flicked her tail to where Redstar was talking with Sloestrike. "I bet he'll send her away with a few nasty bites and scratches."

Skypaw felt comforted at their words and she let out a small purr. "Come on," she mewed, twitching her tail to the apprentice's den. "Let's get out of the sun and chat."

Wisppaw's eyes brightened at her words. "Maybe Fernpaw and Slatepaw will be there too," she meowed hopefully. "I heard that Fernpaw drove off a kittypet trying to get across the stream the other day."

Skypaw playfully shoved her friends with a sneer. "You have the biggest, most obvious crush on Fernpaw!" She teased.

Wisppaw's eyes widened and her ears drew back as she tried to defend herself. "I do not!" She protested, but Bluepaw and Skypaw were already heading down the slope, laughing as Wisppaw tried to catch up with them.

***

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Fallen Tree for a Clan meeting!" Skypaw blinked open her eyes at Redstar's call to find herself in her nest. *I must've fallen asleep while talking with Wisppaw and Bluepaw.* She guessed and pushed herself

to her paws, heading out of the den.

Behind her, a groan came from the den. Slatepaw fumbled out of her nest, her eyes glazed with sleep. "It's too early for this," she mumbled.

"It's nearly sunset," Skypaw pointed out and padded alongside the she-cat into the hollow. She spotted Wisppaw and Bluepaw near the warrior's den and bounded over to her friends. "What's going on?" She whispered as she sat down beside Bluepaw.

"Redstar is going to decide who goes to the Gathering," Bluepaw whispered back, her ears pricked and eyes gleaming.

Redstar waved his tail for silence as the murmuring grew to a curious buzz. "The Gathering is tonight and I have decided who will attend." He announced. "Those who will go will be as follows: Sloestrike, Softear, Shadepaw, Brackenmist, Darkfeather, Wollyfire, Driftbird, Finchsong, Gorseflower, Robinfoot, Whiskertail, Jayfang, Bluepaw, Wisppaw, Greenpaw, Skypaw, Fernpaw, and Slatepaw."

Beside her, Bluepaw squeaked with excitement. "We're going to the Gathering!" She mewed under her breath, her voice riddled with joy.

Redstar dismissed the Clan and leaped down from the Fallen Tree and headed for the three apprentices. Skypaw stiffened as his eyes rested on her and he stopped a fox-length away from them. "I wanted to take you since you've never seen a different Clan cat other than us and your father." He told her with a brisk dip of his head. "Get something to eat before we go. You'll need the strength."

Skypaw dipped her head respectfully to the leader as Redstar blinked and padded away. She turned back to her friends and found them gawking at her in awe. "What?"

"Wow!" Breathed Wisppaw as she watched the leader duck into the nursery after Morningshine. "Redstar's never done *that* before."

Bluepaw circled Skypaw, her eyes wide. "I wonder what he has in store for you," she mewed and nudged her shoulder. "Why has he

taken such interest with you?"

Skypaw shrugged at their words, but worry clung to her pelt. Was Redstar planning something for her? Or was something going to happen that only the leader knew about?

***

WindClan was the last Clan to reach the Gathering Island. Skypaw padded alongside Darkfeather as Redstar led the way into the large clearing. The scents of so many different cats bombarded Skypaw until she thought her nose would permanently twitch for the rest of her life.

"Remember," Darkfeather said as she turned her head to her apprentice. "There is a truce but not every cat will be friendly. Don't say too much and don't say too little. Make some friends if you can."

Skypaw nodded nervously as she stared across the throng of cats she didn't know. How many cats were there? Too many to count and Skypaw found Wisppaw and Bluepaw heading toward a group of pine-smelling cats. Skypaw hurried after her friends and fell into step beside them.

Bluepaw twitched her ears as she caught up and sat down with Wisppaw and Skypaw. "Hello," she greeted the four cats respectfully with a dip of her head. "What are your names?"

A white she-cat with gray patches dipped her head in response. "My name is Cloudpaw," she replied. "This is Moonpaw, Oakpaw, and Badgerpaw." She gestured to the cats around her with a paw.

Bluepaw nodded. "I'm Bluepaw and this is Wisppaw and Skypaw." She flicked her tail. "Is this your first Gathering?" She asked.

Cloudpaw shook her head and the other three cats she'd named did the same. "We've been apprentices for about three moons and this is our second Gathering. We had to miss the last one because we got in trouble with Vixenstar."

Wisppaw blinked in surprise. "What Clan are you from?" She questioned, her eyes alight with interest. "We're from WindClan."

Moonpaw nodded, his amber eyes glowing. "I could smell the heather on your fur," he meowed matter-of-factly. "We're from ShadowClan."

"Who are the leaders?" Skypaw asked, tail tip twitching curiously.

Moonpaw pointed with a white paw to the tallest tree she'd ever seen. "Vixenstar is the light calico, Icestar is the gray tabby, Copperstar is the reddish-brown one, and Squirrelstar is the dark red tom."

Beside her, Wisppaw bristled at the sight of Copperstar. "That arrogant furball attacked our camp last moon!" She hissed to the ShadowClan apprentices.

Oakpaw's eyes widened in horror. "What? Why?" He asked, his green eyes shocked.

Bluepaw shoved Wisppaw and gave her a hard look. "No cat knows other than Copperstar," she responded tersely as she flashed a look at Oakpaw. "Who are your mentors?"

"Gorsefeather is my mentor," mewed Cloudpaw, puffing her chest out proudly.

Moonpaw flattened his ears and looked at his paws. "Cindershine is mine," he mumbled under his breath.

Badgerpaw glared at Cloudpaw. "Peartail is my mentor." He meowed, looking back at the WindClan she-cats.

"And Echoshine is mine." Oakpaw finished with a curious look at Skypaw. "What about you? Who are your mentors?"

Bluepaw puffed out her chest just like Cloudpaw had, her eyes sparkling with arrogance. "Mine's Brackenmist." She announced with a sly look at the ShadowClan cats.

Wisppaw shoved her with a paw, her eyes glittering with annoyance. "Mine's Cinderlight," she meowed, looking back at Oakpaw.

"And mine's Darkfeather," Skypaw said, trying her best to not see the growing curiosity in Moonpaw and Cloudpaw's eyes.

"What happened to Morningshine?" Badgerpaw asked, his voice gruff and directing the attention away from her. "Is she sick?"

Wisppaw shook her head. "She had Redstar's kits about a moon ago," she replied with a twitch of her whiskers. "Sloestrike is the new deputy."

"Hush!" A ShadowClan cat turned around, their eyes gleaming with annoyance. "The leaders are about to speak!"

The four ShadowClan apprentices ducked their heads in embarrassment while the WindClan cats looked confused.

"Sorry, Yellowleaf." Mewed Oakpaw as he lapped at his chest fur. When the she-cat turned her attention back the leaders, Oakpaw whispered to Skypaw. "Where's Softear and Shadepaw?"

Skypaw flicked her tail to where the medicine cat and her apprentice were sitting with five other cats. She raised her eyes to the tree just as Redstar started to speak.

"Prey is running well in WindClan, and we have taken advantage of StarClan's blessing." He reported. "We have three new apprentices! Please welcome Skypaw, Fernpaw, and Slatepaw!"

Skypaw felt shock creep up her body as the cats around her exploded into cheering. She ducked behind Bluepaw, embarrassment flooding through her like a river.

"Other than that," Redstar went on. "Morningshine has given birth to three healthy kits, so has Lakespots, and Nutfoot's kits Woolkit and Fawnkit should be made apprentices soon." He dipped his head and sat down. "That is all WindClan has to report."

Vixenstar shot the tom a warm look. "New kits are always good news to every cat," she purred and Redstar nodded. "ShadowClan doesn't have anything new to report other than there have been some fox sightings near the ThunderClan border. Other than that, prey has been running well."

Skypaw tensed as Copperstar rose to his paws. "ThunderClan has suffered the loss of our beloved deputy, Sunwatcher, who was slain in battle against WindClan." He turned his blue gaze onto Redstar, who stiffened. "WindClan has been trespassing onto ThunderClan land and we will not stand for it any longer."

Redstar returned the tom's glare with his own. "WindClan has not been trespassing on any Clan's land, Copperstar." He meowed evenly, but Skypaw could tell he was fighting back anger. "We have stuck to our borders."

"Then explain why WindClan scent has been all over killed prey!" Spat the ThunderClan leader as his back arched and his lips drew back into a snarl. "Your warriors have been killing my Clan's prey!"

Skypaw leaped to her paws, pelt bristling with indignation. A paw on her shoulder from Oakpaw made her turn and she saw the tom shake his head. Reluctantly, she sat back down, claws digging into the cool damp earth.

"No cat has been over that stream for moons, Copperstar." Called the furious voice of Wollyfire. Skypaw couldn't see the tunneler, but she could tell he was relatively close to her. "Can't ThunderClan cats tell the difference between another Clan's scent from their own?"

The taunt seemed to infuriate the copper tabby leader even further. "ThunderClan cat's don't steal prey from other Clans," he spat back. He turned to Redstar, eyes blazing with anger. "And we certainly do not kill another Clan's deputy!"

Redstar bristled. "Sunwatcher died because of your foolishness, Copperstar." He retorted hotly before taking a deep breath. "WindClan hasn't stolen any prey, no matter what you say." Turning to the gathered cats, he went on. "It was ThunderClan who attacked and nearly killed our elder, Jayfang. It was ThunderClan who attacked our camp first. And it is ThunderClan who makes false accusations as always."

Icestar interjected before Copperstar could respond with his claws. "With all due respect, Copperstar," she meowed, her voice sharp and sympathetic. Copperstar turned on the leader, teeth bared. "You

have been throwing around accusations like prey in greenleaf." Turning back to the gathered cats, she meowed. "RiverClan has two new apprentices! Please welcome Sedgepaw and Brackenpaw!"

"Sedgepaw! Brackenpaw!" Cheered the cats from the Clans, but some were silent from the argument between WindClan and ThunderClan.

"Brownstripe's kit will hopefully join them in the apprentice den shortly." Icestar dipped her head. "That is all RiverClan has to report."

Squirelstar stepped forward. "SkyClan has been doing well while prey runs plentifully through our trees." He meowed. "We have nothing else to report."

Redstar got to his paws. "I declare this Gathering at an end," he looked around at the leaders, avoiding Copperstar's hard stare. "WindClan! We're leaving!" He leaped down from the branch and landed hard on the ground, staggering before Sloestrike held him up.

Skypaw turned to the ShadowClan apprentices and dipped her head. "Goodbye," she meowed politely and spun around and hurried to catch up with Darkfeather, who was getting ready to leave with Wollyfire.

Darkfeather purred a greeting as she touched noses with her apprentice. "Where's Bluepaw and Wisppaw?" She asked.

"I think they're with Brackenmist and Cinderlight," Skypaw replied and looked around. "If not, I think they're with the rest of the Clan."

Darkfeather shrugged. "I'm not too worried about it," she turned away and padded after Whiskertail and Jayfang, who were following Robinfoot, deep in conversation. "How did you like your first Gathering?"

Skypaw brightened. "It was great!" She meowed fervently, recalling meeting the ShadowClan apprentices. "I got to meet four other apprentices."

Darkfeather's eyes sparkled with intrigue. "Really?" Skypaw nodded. "From which Clan?" She asked curiously.

"ShadowClan."

Her mentor's eyes glittered with slight worry but she masked it before Skypaw could be sure it was there. "That's great," she meowed and flicked her tail. "Come on, we don't want to be left behind."

As Skypaw fell in beside her mentor, she felt a pang of fear at Copperstar's earlier words. Have WindClan cats been crossing the border and stealing prey? She shook her head, trying to clear it. Of course her Clanmates wouldn't do that. Would they?

Chapter 7

Skypaw marked the tree on the edge of WindClan's territory. Her weariness from getting up so early dragged at her fur as she rejoined the rest of the patrol. The sun was barely starting to rise and Skypaw could see the exhaustion on the rest of her patrolmates' faces.

Logstorm yawned, showing off his pointy yellow teeth. "Is everything marked?" He asked, seeing Skypaw padding up. The apprentice nodded, trying not to show her tiredness from the Gathering the night before. "Good. What about you, Ravenstem?"

The fluffy black tom emerged from behind a boulder, his fur ruffled as he fluffed it out from the early morning chill. "Everything's good over here," he meowed, his voice a low grunt.

Skypaw shivered as the cool moorland nipped at her paw pads. She looked over at the SkyClan forest, where the trees loomed over them. She could hear birds chirping in the tall trees and her ears pricked as she padded toward the border, halting before she could cross it.

Behind her, Ravenstem strode to her side. His green eyes were narrowed and his ears twitched back and forth. "SkyClan has been bothering this border since before you joined the Clan," he told her with a glance. "Even if they are well-fed, we're the swiftest cats around the lake."

Logstorm trotted up on Skypaw's other side, his shoulders tense. "Which is why moor runner apprentices are fought over along with the tunnelers." He added with a flick of his tail. He looked over at Skypaw and his orange eyes twinkled with mischief. "When you're a warrior, you'll be faster than a rabbit chased by a fox."

"Are you sure about that, Logstorm?" Snarled a voice from the other side of the border. Skypaw's ears pricked as three cats slid from the fern, their eyes flashing as they took in the dawn patrol. "You all

look awfully scrawny."

Logstorm flattened his ears and Ravenstem pressed protectively against Skypaw. "We're faster than you could ever be, Sedgewing." He retorted.

A silver tabby she-cat pinned Skypaw with her eyes and the apprentice flinched at the menace in the warrior's orange eyes. "And what about that mewling lump of fur?" She taunted in a snarl. "She looks like a kittypet! Is WindClan so desperate for cats that they'd take in soft kits?"

Ravenstem hissed in response. "You're certainly one to talk, Eelheart." He spat back, pelt bristling. "Your father was a kittypet himself, right?"

Eelheart let out a snarl but said nothing more.

An auburn tabby she-cat bared her teeth, eyes narrowing in taunting hostility. "Is that supposed to do something, Ravenstem?" She demanded, her tail lashing back and forth. "Come over here and do something other than talk us to death."

A low growl came from deep in Ravenstem's throat and Skypaw felt her claws unsheathe as they faced the SkyClan patrol in a protective battle line.

"You need to leave now," growled Logstorm as he took a threatening step forward, eyes nothing more than mere slits. "If you do, this will be forgotten."

The auburn she-cat twitched her ear and her Clanmates sized up the WindClan cats. "And if we don't?" Her voice was laced with mockery. "Will you kill us?"

With a roar of anger, Logstorm cleared the border in a single long stride and tackled the she-cat. Ravenstem leaped forward, following his lead and locked into battle with Eelheart. Skypaw found herself facing the light gray she-cat Logstorm called Sedgewing.

Sedgewing snarled and lunged forward, raking her ear with her claws before ducking and springing onto her back. Churning paws

buried themselves into Skypaw's back with the claws digging into her pelt. The apprentice let out a screech of pain and fury and she rolled onto her back, dislodging the SkyClan warrior.

Skypaw whirled around, snapping her jaws at the she-cat's paw and rearing onto her hind legs as she drew back with a hiss. She landed a blow on Sedgewing's head and cheek before pain sparked in her hind legs and she dropped on all fours. Eelheart had escaped Ravenstem's claws and was nipping sharply at her hind paws.

Skypaw let out a growl and kicked out, hitting Eelheart square between her eyes before slashing her shoulder. She turned her head as paws ran toward her and her eyes widened as Sedgewing slammed her paws into her side, knocking her off her paws as the breath rushed from her chest. She fell onto her side and yowled in fear as well as distress as claws ripped at her pelt.

"Get away from her!" Ravenstem's snarl was followed by a grunt and the weight holding Skypaw down vanished as Sedgewing grappled with the black moor runner. "You coward!" He spat as he raised a paw and raked her shoulder. "You'd rather fight an apprentice younger than you than take on a full-grown warrior! Guess I should've expected it from you."

Sedgewing was thrust into the ground as Skypaw whipped around to dodge a blow from Eelheart. She sank her teeth deep into her shoulder and tasted the warm tang of blood. Sedgewing screeched in pain and shoved Skypaw away, glaring at her. "SkyClan!" She called as she turned away. "Retreat!" She limped away, her Clanmates hot on her heels.

"And don't taunt us again!" Logstorm growled as he released Eelheart. He turned to Ravenstem and Skypaw, the rage storming in his eyes like a wildfire. "Are you two okay?"

Ravenstem nodded as he turned to Skypaw, who was getting to her paws. "What about you?" He asked, sniffing her from ears to claws. "Are you badly hurt?"

Skypaw shook her head, but her injuries burned like fire as she tried to take a step but stumbled, falling against Ravenstem.

"Rabbit-dung," she cursed and dug her claws into the ground to steady herself. "What will we do now?" She glanced up at Logstorm as the moor runner stared across the border with dark eyes.

It was Ravenstem who answered. "We'll head back to the camp," he told her as he supported her weight on his shoulder. "We need to report to Redstar and get our injuries treated."

***

"What in StarClan's name happened?" Darkfeather gasped as the returning dawn patrol stumbled into the camp. She rushed toward her apprentice, eyes wide with shock and dismay. "Was there a fight?"

Logstorm nodded, anger still burning in his orange eyes. "SkyClan challenged us at the border while we were marking it," he explained. "Where is Redstar?" He asked.

"On patrol," Darkfeather responded as she looked Skypaw over. "He wanted to hunt for Morningshine and the kits. Sloestrike is resting in Softear's den."

Alarm flashed through Skypaw. "What happened?" She questioned.

Her mentor sighed and lowered her voice. "Softear said he's caught something from the Gathering," she meowed, worry thick in her mew. "Her and Shadepaw aren't sure what it is, but it's serious."

Ravenstem flinched and looked across the camp to Softear's den. "What will happen to him while he's ill?" He asked, worry clear in his voice.

Darkfeather shrugged. "No idea, but Redstar will have to place a cat to take Sloestrike's duties while he's sick." She looked at the dawn patrol. "Shadepaw made a temporary set-up by the far corner away from the den. I suggest you get your injuries treated there instead of in Softear's den."

Logstorm nodded and dipped his head. "Will do. Thanks, Darkfeather." He meowed and led the way to the furthest corner away from the rest of the hollow. Jutting rocks and boulders

provided enough shelter from the weather as Skypaw ducked inside. "Shadepaw?"

"Logstorm?" Shadepaw poked his head out from the darkness and took in the battered patrol. "What happened?" He gestured the three cats inside and started patching them up.

"A SkyClan patrol got a bit too cocky when taunting us," Ravenstem winced as Shadepaw chewed some sharp-smelling green herbs and let the juices trickle into his wounds. "We showed them that we are a force to be reckoned with and they retreated rather quickly."

"That's good," purred Shadepaw as he swiftly and efficiently wrapped Ravenstem's wounds with herbs and cobwebs before moving onto Skypaw. "How was the weather?"

Logstorm flicked the tom's ear with his tail playfully. "We didn't exactly keep watch on the weather while fighting for our territory," he teased.

Shadepaw sent a flinty look over at the warrior but Skypaw saw affection in the brash tom's eyes. *Are they friends?* She wondered as her back scratches were treated.

***

All Skypaw heard in the peaceful hollow of the camp was coughing and retching. Sloestrike's illness had spread faster than a rushing river. Breezeblaze, Rippleblaze, Rabbitspring, and Bluetail had come down with the same symptoms Sloestrike had. Bluepaw had been anxious since the morning Breezeblaze was guided into Softear's den, which was riddled with sickness.

"Why are you so upset about Breezeblaze?" She'd asked the night before. "He's just a Clanmate."

Bluepaw had shifted on her paws, blue eyes full of distress and fear. "You know that Darkfeather is my mother, right?" Skypaw had nodded. "Well, Breezeblaze is my father. And I can't sit around doing nothing while he wastes away in a nest in the medicine cat den."

Since their conversation, Bluepaw constantly kept her paws busy with chores around the camp, training, hunting, and patrolling. Skypaw admired her need to do something while her father was being treated. Unfortunately, neither Softear nor Shadepaw could find out what the sick cats had and every day, they got sicker and sicker.

Redstar had ordered the Clan to stay away from the den, other than to drop soaked moss, bedding, and prey. "Don't go near Softear's den until we know it's safe," he'd meowed when Breezeblaze and Rabbitspring joined Sloestrike in the den. "Go straight to Shadepaw and Softear if you feel sick."

Skypaw felt a twinge of doubt that the medicine cat and her apprentice would find a cure to whatever illness her Clanmates had in time before they started dying. Softear had said that the cats hadn't responded to what little catmint they had, and their symptoms were worse than greencough. Skypaw sighed and rested her chin on her front paws as the sun crept into the sky, turning the sky to a pretty cream and pink combination that the apprentice found pleasing to look at.

With each passing day, her wounds healed bit by bit and she felt stronger. Thanks to Shadepaw and Softear's herbs, Skypaw felt energized and fit to take on that SkyClan patrol again. She stared gloomily across the camp as the cats in the hollow started to wake up and get the day started with patrols and training.

Wisppaw and Bluepaw emerged from the apprentice's den and they waited for a heartbeat as Greenpaw came out, grumbling as his sister teased him. Skypaw pricked her ears, unable to catch their words. Jealousy flickered in her chest as she watched the other apprentices join their mentors before chattering like starlings as they headed out of the camp.

"Jealousy isn't a good look on you, Skypaw." Commented the voice of Robinfoot as the elder approached her. Skypaw looked up at her, her chest as hollow as the camp. Robinfoot laid down beside her, fur brushing as she stared across the camp. "What are you thinking about?"

Skypaw shrugged. "Nothing, I guess." She mumbled and looked at her paws as she rolled a pebble under her pad. "I'm just restless staying here in camp."

Robinfoot gave an amused purr and watched as Woolkit, Fawnkit, Myrtlekit, Parsleykit, and Pigeonkit tumbled out of the nursery as Nutfoot watched from the nursery. "Just like me, Whiskertail, and Jayfang." She purred and glanced at the apprentice out of the corner of her green eyes. "What's on your mind?" Skypaw avoided the elder's probing stare. "Come on, darling. You can tell me. It's not like I gossip like Whiskertail and Jayfang."

Skypaw hesitated and she spotted Parlseykit pinning Woolkit to the ground as the kit wriggled furiously underneath him. "It's nothing you should be concerned about, Robinfoot." She meowed and pushed herself to her paws, gritting her teeth against the pain as it flared in her body. "You're an elder, you don't need to worry yourself with a warrior's problems." She knew the words were shallow and cold and she saw the she-cat narrow her eyes. Shoving away the regret in her chest, Skypaw headed out of the makeshift den and padded into the hollow.

"Skypaw?" The apprentice perked up at the sound of Silversong's voice as the moor runner padded toward her.

"Silversong," she nodded a greeting to the older warrior and twitched her ears. "What's up?"

The she-cat twitched her whiskers as she sat down, curling her fluffy tail over her short legs. "Have you seen Rippleblaze? I need to talk to him."

Skypaw tipped her head back as she ran through the cats she'd seen in the camp so far. She shook her head. "I don't think I have." She looked at the silver tabby in curiosity. "What's the matter?" Her ears flicked forward to the she-cat as she hesitated.

Silversong avoided her gaze as she stared down at her small paws. "I'm expecting his kits," she mewed, her voice awkward. She glanced up at Skypaw, something flaring in her light blue eyes. "I'll have to tell Redstar. Has he chosen a cat to replace Sloestrike?"

Skypaw shook her head. "He hasn't announced it yet." She glanced over at the leader's den where the tom was washing himself with Morningshine as their kits mewled and tumbled over each other, their eyes closed. "Some cats think he never will."

The silver tabby she-cat snorted. "He'd better before Sloestrike dies," she shook her head and got to her feet. "Well, I'd better find Rippleblaze. See you later, Skypaw."

The apprentice blinked a farewell to the warrior and scanned the camp, searching for her mentor. Where was Darkfeather? Was she on patrol? Skypaw stiffened as scrabbling claws alerted her and she flattened her ears, bunching her muscles.

"Heads up!" She blinked as Gorseflower burst into the camp, a large white rabbit charging in front of her, eyes wide with terror. "Catch it!" Gorseflower barked at Skypaw as she funneled the animal toward the apprentice.

Skypaw narrowed her eyes on the hare and crouched down, springing forward and knocking the rabbit onto its back, killing it quickly with a bite to the neck. She looked up at Gorseflower, who was panting hard as Brackenmist and Logstorm followed.

"Good catch," purred Bluepaw as she came out from behind Brackenmist. She padded to Skypaw and stopped, looking at the rabbit at her paws. "It'll be better than anything on the prey-heap now that it was just caught."

Logstorm joined Bluepaw and flicked her ears with his tail. "Then go give it to Softear and Shadepaw," he meowed briskly, but he gave Skypaw an approving glance. "If it gets too warm, it'll taste worse than it'll smell."

Bluepaw rolled her eyes and looked at Skypaw. "Wanna come with me?" She invited as she took the rabbit between her jaws and started to Softear's den.

Skypaw followed eagerly. "How was the moor?" She asked, looking at her friend. She noticed a spring in her step that she hadn't seen earlier and twitched her tail.

Bluepaw shrugged. "Don't know. I didn't get to hunt except on the way back." Her eyes glowed. "I practice battle moves with Greenpaw and Wisppaw."

Skypaw's eyes widened. "You should've been on the dawn patrol when we faced off against SkyClan." She meowed and stopped in front of Softear's den as Bluepaw dropped the rabbit. "It was a good skirmish."

Her friend snorted and shook her head. "Softear! Shadepaw!" She called down into the hole. "Skypaw and I brought some prey!"

When there was no answer, Skypaw poked her head inside and gagged at the sour scent of sickness mixed with herbs. She turned away, almost retching. "Gross!" She remarked, looking at Bluepaw.

"That's why you shouldn't come inside," meowed the exhausted and sad voice of Softear as she came out of the den. Her creamy pelt was matted and it smelled like dung.

Bluepaw was instantly alert. "What happened?" She demanded, seeing the tired Shadepaw haul himself out of the den after his mentor and flop on the ground. "Is every cat alright?"

Softear shook her head slowly and Shadepaw's eyes clouded with misery. "Bluetail died," she mewed quietly as she lowered her gaze to the ground. "We did everything we could, but it was too late."

Skypaw's eyes widened as Bluepaw crouched down, trembling hard as she stared blankly ahead. "W-what about Sloestrike?" She asked, her voice shaking. Could the deputy be at death's paws as well?

"He's very weak, and he and the others aren't responding to any of the herbs we've given them." Softear let out a defeated sigh. "We may have to let whatever sickness they have run its course."

Bluepaw stared at the medicine cat, horror clear in her eyes. "You mean you're going to let them die?" Anger sharpened her mew and Skypaw glanced at her, pelt prickling. "I won't let you kill my father!" Without warning, she shot by the medicine cats and dove into the illness-riddled den. "Breezeblaze!"

"Bluepaw!" Skypaw was about to dash after her when Softear stopped her. "What are you doing? Get her out of there! She could get sick!"

Softear's eyes clouded. "There's not much we can do for her grief, Skypaw." She flattened her pointed ear to her head in distress. "Shadepaw, get Bluepaw out of the camp and take her to the stream to wash off the sickness from your pelts." She ordered.

Shadepaw rose from the ground, eyes hollow. "What about you?" He croaked, and Skypaw felt shocked that the usual gruff tom sounded so upset. "What are you going to do?"

Softear's determined stare didn't waver from Skypaw's. "I'm going to RiverClan," she looked at Shadepaw. "I'm going to ask Ryeflight if he has any idea what's going on."

Chapter 8

"Woolpaw! Fawnpaw! Woolpaw! Fawnpaw!" Cheered the cats as the newly named apprentices stood in the center of the clearing, their eyes bright and tails high above their backs.

In the moon since Bluetail's death, the Clan struggled to cope as Rippleblaze joined StarClan soon after her vigil. Skypaw felt bad for Silversong, who had just discovered she was expecting his kits and had to raise their second litter without him.

Ryeflight, RiverClan's medicine cat, had diagnosed the illness as yellowcough. It was worse than greencough but not as bad as redcough. The cure, as it turned out, was a plant called lungwort.

Since the discovery, Rabbitspring and Breezeblaze had made a full recovery and were both back on light duties. Skypaw was grateful that Breezeblaze hadn't died. For Bluepaw, she'd been freaking out non-stop when Softear left the territory and talked to Ryeflight.

Woolpaw and Fawnpaw's new mentors were Wolfleaf and Hawkpool. Inwardly, Skypaw figured that the reason the tunnelers were getting more apprentices was to even out the ratio of moor runners and tunnelers.

"Meeting dismissed." Redstar mewed and got down from the Fallen Tree and headed toward Morningshine, who was sitting outside of the nursery.

"More cats in the apprentice den," groaned Fernpaw as he looked at Woolpaw and Fawnpaw. "Just what we needed."

Skypaw nudged him playfully. "Don't be too enthusiastic," she teased. "You and Slatepaw take up over half of the den too. Woolpaw and Fawnpaw probably snore as loud as you do anyway."

"Skypaw!" Fernpaw twitched his whiskers in amusement at her before rising to his paws. "You'd better go see what Logstorm wants

before he claws your pelt off." He whisked his tail under her chin and padded away to join Slatepaw and Greenpaw by the prey-heap.

Since Sloestrike had the illness the worst, he hadn't fully recovered and he had a constant wheeze and cough. He'd retired to the elder's den, and Logstorm replaced him as deputy. He was a good choice, but Redstar seemed uneasy about the replacement of the deputy.

Skypaw padded to the new deputy and flicked her tail. "You called me?" She prompted.

Logstorm nodded, angling his ears to where Redstar waited outside his den. "Redstar wants to talk to you," he mewed. "He said it was urgent and important. Best to not keep him waiting."

Skypaw nodded respectfully and she headed for the leader. As she padded up, she saw a shadow of worry and doubt on Redstar's face. "You wanted to talk to me?" She asked.

Redstar nodded and twitched his ears to his den. "Come." He commanded and padded inside, Skypaw on his heels. Once they were inside, Redstar faced her. "Are you happy in WindClan?" He asked, his voice troubled.

Skypaw flattened her ears. "Of course I am!" She meowed fervently. "I love being in a Clan!"

Her leader nodded slowly and she paused. "Are you still close with your family?" He meowed, his voice a low murmur.

Skypaw blinked in alarm at the leader and she thought back to Cherry's attack as she drove her away. She shook her head and peered up at the tom. "No." She meowed firmly.

Redstar's shoulders tensed and his yellow eyes burned into hers. "Are you sure?" He pressed and Skypaw stiffened. "Have you been seeing your family when no cat is around?"

Anger pulsed through her as she realized the tom wasn't convinced. "Of course I'm not!" She snapped harshly. "I don't know why you're suddenly questioning my loyalty to WindClan, but I would *never* go

back to my old life in that barn!"

"Then why are your littermates scouting the border like foxes?" Redstar retorted, his eyes burning. Skypaw took a step back, alarmed. "Are you trying to take over my Clan?"

Skypaw blinked in surprise. "What are you talking about?" She meowed, bewildered. Then, her anger returned and she unsheathed her claws. "I'm not doing anything to your Clan!" She spat angrily. "If you think I am, you're dead wrong. I would never betray the Clan that has helped me."

Redstar's hackles rose and his shoulder fur bristled into sharp spikes. "Very well," he growled. "You are dismissed."

The apprentice hissed once more before whipping around and stalked out of the den. Her tail lashed as she entered the hollow, her ears flattened against her head.

"I want to see my sister!" Came a familiar snarl and she looked up. Her eyes rested on Juniper as he arched his back at Logstorm, pelt bristling and teeth bared. "You can't keep her prisoner forever!"

"That's right!" Chimed Marsh in a growl as he glared at Cinderlight. "We know you have her!"

"Juniper!" Skypaw cried as the images of her brothers eating and Maple teasing her about catching prey. She rushed to them, eyes wide with emotion and excitement. "What are you doing here?" She asked as she threw herself into her brother's fur.

"We came to rescue you." Juniper lapped at her head and he stared at her, eyes wide with shock. "Marsh and I have missed you, Sky. Cherry was wrong to send you away."

Skypaw hesitated. "Rescue me? I'm not a prisoner." She meowed and watched as Marsh gawked at her. "I chose to join WindClan."

"What are you talking about?" Marsh yelped. "After everything Maple and Cherry told us about the Clans?"

Skypaw dug her claws into the ground as her fur bristled.

"WindClan is nothing like those nursery tales!" She retorted hotly. "Cherry wanted to make it sound like the Clans were nothing but bone-eating, fox-hearted cats! WindClan welcomed me when Cherry did not. This is my home now." Her fur prickled as she realized that every cat in the Clan was watching her and her brothers. She forced her discomfort away and she looked around to see Redstar watching her with dark yellow eyes. "What will you do to them?" She challenged.

"Drive them out!" Screeched Driftbird.

"Claw their pelts!" Called Wollyfire.

"Wait!" Darkfeather stepped up, her tail twitching as the Clan's comments quieted. "Why send healthy, strong, and capable cats away when they could be one of us? Look at Skypaw. She's loyal and has fought for and with us."

Redstar looked thoughtful as the cats around them broke into yowls of agreement and objection. He rose to his paws and waved his tail for silence. He looked from Skypaw to her brothers and back again. Skypaw tensed. "You two were worried where she was?" He asked.

Marsh narrowed his eyes, pelt bristling. "Of course we were," he growled rudely and Skypaw stifled a gasp.

"She's our only sister," Juniper waved his tail and took a pace toward Redstar. At once, Cinderlight and Brackenmist tensed their shoulders and moved to their leader's side. "Of course we were worried."

Redstar dipped his head, his yellow eyes cool and calm. "Why are you here other than to find her?" He asked nonchalantly.

"Our mother killed our father," Marsh meowed sadly, his ears drooping. Skypaw stared at her brother in dismay, eyes wide with shock. He met her gaze, trembling. "She-she went mad after you left, Sky." He rasped, his voice thick with grief. "She lashed out at us and when Maple tried to calm her down, she tore out his throat." His eyes shadowed with the scene that Skypaw couldn't bear to imagine.

Skypaw realized she was shaking and she sank to the ground, staring at her paws as she felt a wail grow in her throat. A body pressed against her side and she felt Bluepaw's scent roll over her. Darkfeather's fur brushed against her other flank and she buried her face in her paws, sobbing.

Juniper went on, his voice strong but it rattled with sorrow. "If this is where Sky lives and enjoys being here," he glanced back at Skypaw. "Then, we'll be more than happy to live here too."

Redstar gave him a hard stare, but Juniper didn't flinch. "Will you learn how to hunt and fight for us and risk your life?" He questioned, his eyes narrowed.

Marsh met his gaze steadily, though raw pain was in his eyes. "Absolutely." He replied.

Skypaw lifted her head as Redstar nodded. "From this moment on, until you both have earned your warrior names, you will be known as Juniperpaw and Marshpaw. Finchsong will be your mentor, Juniperpaw. And Thrushleaf will be yours, Marshpaw." He nodded to the two new apprentices. "Greenpaw and Wisppaw will show you to the apprentice's den and help make you new nests."

Skypaw rose shakily to his paws as the Clan dispersed, murmuring amongst each other. Bluepaw and Darkfeather pressed against her, supporting her trembling body up and to keep her from falling over. What was Redstar doing? One moment he looked like he wanted to shred her ears, and the next he was accepting her brothers into the Clan. *What is he up to?* She wondered with a pang of grief.

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The days went by in a blur as Skypaw numbly did her duties alongside her friends, mentor, and brothers. After hearing of her father's death, nothing seemed as fun anymore. Prey didn't taste as good, running on the moor wasn't as exhilarating, and hunting wasn't as exciting. Her paws felt like lead every time she had to go to the ThunderClan border and could catch a glimpse of the barn where she grew up.

"It'll be okay, Skypaw." Bluepaw had said a few days before when she'd tried to fall asleep. "Your father is in a better place now."

Skypaw wanted to believe her friend, but she couldn't bring herself to. She longed to see her father, to press herself into his pelt, and tell him all about her new life in WindClan. The strange cat that had been with the patrol with Sloestrike had been long gone, after fleeing the camp after a night's sleep.

"Skypaw, are you listening?" Darkfeather's voice cut through the memories of her father and she looked up, her eyes dull. Her mentor sighed in exasperation. "You need to pay more attention."

Skypaw barely heard her mentor as they padded along the ThunderClan border. A fog was building in her mind and she felt blind-sighted of everything that was happening around her. Why would Cherry kill her mate and the father of her kits?

"Skypaw." A paw cuffed her ear and she snapped to attention, glaring in defiance up at Rabbitspring, who glared at her. "Listen to your mentor."

A wave of sudden anger snapped in her chest and she rounded on the tom, hissing and spitting. "Lay off, will you?" She snarled. "I've just discovered that my mother murdered my father! Give me time to grieve!"

Rabbitspring was taken aback but he bared his teeth. "You hold onto cats like a burr," he spat. "Cats die all the time, it's a fact. Cats die and give way for younger, stronger cats to thrive."

Skypaw arched her back, claws extending. "You are so desensitized by death that you think it's a normal part of living!" She shook her head angrily. "Cats dying is not something to brush over. By doing so, you are making it feel like losing a cat shouldn't be as important as it is." She narrowed her eyes at Rabbitspring as the warrior watched her through slitted eyes. "If you think I'm overreacting about something so serious, you need to grow a tail and think." Without waiting for him to respond, she pelted up the slope that led to the camp. She didn't want to be around Rabbitspring any longer than she had to. The close-minded tom was so arrogant and

infuriating, it made Juniperpaw and Marshpaw look attention-deprived.

When she reached the camp, the cats inside were waiting anxiously outside the nursery. She padded toward Cinderlight, confused. "What's going on?" She asked. At once, there was a shriek of pure agony from inside the nursery and her pelt fluffed up in alarm.

Cinderlight cringed at the ear-splitting sound and looked at Skypaw. "Silversong is kitting," she explained. "Softear and Shadepaw are in there with her now."

Skypaw sat down next to the she-cat and scuffed her paws. "How long has she been kitting?"

"Not long," replied the light gray she-cat as she nodded to the nursery. "Lakespots told Softear when Silversong started complaining about belly cramps."

Skypaw pricked her ears as Shadepaw slid out of the nursery, his eyes tired. She wondered what the tom was thinking about while delivering kits. Was he excited about new kits or was he still guilty about the loss of Rippleblaze and Bluetail?

"Why can't we see the kits being born?" Complained Sparkkit as she trotted over to Skypaw and Cinderlight. Her stubby legs and short tail were sturdy but she hobbled over unevenly. "Lakespots' kits got to see us being born!"

Cinderlight looked down at the she-kit and she flicked her tail over her ears. "You're too young to see kits being born," she mewed gently. "Besides, it's better for Silversong and Softear that they don't have kits constantly underpaw."

Sparkkit was staring up at Skypaw, making her uncomfortable. "Can I have a badger ride?" She asked, tail twitching back and forth. "Please?"

Skypaw blinked in surprise as she hunkered down, allowing the red-and-white tabby kit scramble onto her back and sink her claws into her fur. She winced, but she rose to her full height and peered

around. "Where do you want to go?" She asked.

Sparkkit put her paws on her head and looked around. "To the moor!" She squeaked. "I wanna see the lake!"

Skypaw shook her head. "I can't take you outside the camp until you're an apprentice." She mewed apologetically as the kit let out a frustrated huff. "I can take you to the elder's den." She offered.

"I want to see the moor!" Sparkkit insisted. "Lakespots' kits got to see the moor a few days ago!"

Skypaw twitched her whiskers as she padded around the camp. "They're two moons older than you and your littermates." She reminded the feisty kit gently. "They'll be apprentices in three moons."

Sparkkit looked down at Skypaw, her eyes wide. "Will you be a warrior by then?" She blinked her blue eyes at the apprentice, and Skypaw shrugged.

"That's for Redstar to decide," she replied as she headed for the apprentice's den. "Do you want to see inside?" She asked, halting a tail-length from the entrance.

The blue-eyed kit perked up, her eyes shining eagerly. "Yes, please!" She mewed, her paws battering the top of Skypaw's head.

"Alright, alright," chided the apprentice as she ducked inside. She let Sparkkit slither off her head with a *thump* and watched in amusement as the kit bounded around the den. "That's Greenpaw and Slatepaw's nest." She called as the kit approached two gorse nests that were combined together. "And that's Fernpaw, Woolpaw, and Fawnpaw's nests." She nodded to the far nests at the corner of the den."

"Where are Juniperpaw and Marshpaw's nests?" Asked Sparkkit as she looked around the den.

"Over there." Skypaw pointed with her tail to the two nests near the center of the den. "Mine, Bluepaw, Wisppaw, and Fernpaw's nests are in the right corner."

"Wow," breathed Sparkkit as she tottered up to Skypaw, her blue eyes wide with wonder. "When will I become an apprentice?" She asked, looking up at the she-cat.

"Not for another five moons," purred Skypaw as she licked the top of her head. "Maybe then, I'll be a warrior." She mewed with a twitch of her ears.

"I want you to be my mentor!" Sparkkit declared as she reared on her hind legs, swatting at her chest with a squeal. "I'll be the best warrior in WindClan!"

Skypaw gave an affectionate flick of her tail at the kit's ambitious words. "I can't choose if I will be your mentor," she reminded her. "Redstar decides that."

"Sparkkit!" Skypaw heard Morningshine's call from the hollow and she turned around. "Sparkkit, where are you? Come here at once!"

Behind her, Sparkkit groaned in annoyance. "Coming, Morningshine." She mumbled and hurried up the small incline that led out of the apprentice's den.

Skypaw followed and saw Softear and Shadepaw dragging Silversong's limp form out of the nursery. Her heart froze as she saw blood trailing after the queen and she heard squealing from the den. "What happened?" She asked, bounding up to Bluepaw and Fernpaw as they watched in sadness.

"She bled out," Fernpaw said, his voice sullen. "Shadepaw said that there wasn't enough time to save her when the kits came. They're in the nursery, being nursed by Lakespots."

Bluepaw hung her head. "She's with Rippleblaze now," she murmured and Skypaw sat down next to her, rasping her tongue comfortingly over her ear.

"Cats of WindClan," Redstar began as he padded forward, his eyes gleaming with grief and determination. Skypaw looked up, her body rigid with tension. "Silversong died giving birth to four kits. Softear, what did she name the kits?" He turned to his medicine cat,

tail flicking.

Softear raised her head to meet her leader's gaze steadily. "Twigkit, Eaglekit, Furzekit, and Haykit." She replied, her voice bland and flat.

Redstar bowed his head. "May StarClan guide their paws as their parents cannot." He meowed solemnly as he blinked at Softear. "Get her ready for her vigil, we will sit with her with respect and honor."

Skypaw looked up at the sky, her ears twitching at the mention of StarClan. She never asked too many questions about the starry ancestors of the Clans. Then again, she didn't think it would go well. *Even if they are real,* she thought. *It shouldn't be a rule to believe in them.*

Chapter 9

As the moons rolled steadily into leafbare, Skypaw felt her grief about Cherry killing Maple slowly easing until it became a dull ache in her heart. She trained harder and harder, throwing herself into overdrive as she strived to be better than the other apprentices. Bluepaw and Wisppaw were her best friends and a moon ago, Lakespots' kits were made into apprentices. Their mentors were Gorseflower, Rainstream, and Breezeblaze.

She opened her eyes as coughing echoed off the walls of the apprentice den. Skypaw lifted her head and looked around, confused. Bluepaw and Wisppaw were rousing in their nests beside her, but Fernpaw and Slatepaw were sitting up in their nests. Fernpaw was coughing hard and Slatepaw was trying to coax her brother to go see Softear and Shadepaw.

"They'll help with your cough," the she-cat was urging as she nosed her brother to his paws. "You don't want to catch greencough or whitecough."

"What's going on with him?" Skypaw asked, rising to her paws and padding over with a deep concern for the two littermates. If Fernpaw was sick, Slatepaw could catch it as well.

Slatepaw turned her worried green eyes on Skypaw. "He's been coughing like this since last night," she explained, her voice fearful and concerned. "I thought he had a furball and it wouldn't come out. But now, he's wheezing and his voice is so dry."

Fernpaw broke off from coughing to look over at Slatepaw and Skypaw. "I swallowed a snowflake," he croaked and Skypaw felt alarm flash through her at the dryness in his voice. He was shaking and he sounded so hoarse, he sounded less like himself and more like Logstorm. "That's all." He started coughing again, and Slatepaw flattened her ears.

"Coughing and wheezing like you have been isn't caused by

swallowing a snowflake!" Slatepaw retorted and Skypaw could hear the intense fear and concern in her mew. "Come on, we're going to Softear's den."

"You'd better hurry," urged Skypaw as she headed for Bluepaw and Wisppaw's nests. "I'm going to tell Wollyfire where you are and how you're doing." She prodded her friends awake and headed after the two littermates as they left the den. The snow that had fallen over the last few days sparkled and she screwed her eyes up at the fierce light that bounced off the white powder.

"Skypaw," a mew came from her right and she looked up to see Darkfeather padding toward her. Her mentor's eyes were bright and her breath puffed in front of her in an icy cloud. "I think we'll work on your fighting skills today," she meowed as she reached her apprentice. "Go have something to eat, something small, and I'll wake up the others."

"Wait," Skypaw stopped her mentor with a paw before she could go into the apprentice's den. Darkfeather halted, looking at her in confusion. "Slatepaw took Fernpaw to Softear's den because he was coughing. She thinks he might be sick."

Darkfeather's eyes clouded with worry and she nodded slowly. "And what about Bluepaw and the others?" She asked, her voice low.

"Fine, to my knowledge," Skypaw responded and looked across the camp as Shadepaw emerged from the medicine cat's den. "It was only Fernpaw that was coughing, but Slatepaw and Greenpaw could also get sick."

Darkfeather was quiet for a long moment before she spoke. "Alright," she mewed finally as she flicked her tail. "Well, go eat, go for a short walk, get a drink, and meet me at the camp entrance." She looked at Skypaw, her eyes concerned. "I don't want you or the other apprentices getting sick. So, don't go near the medicine cat's den or the nursery. Just to be safe."

Skypaw nodded and headed off. She approached the prey-heap and saw a scrawny mouse and three thin rabbits. Choosing one of the rabbits, she dragged it to the base of the hill and ate it with a

couple of hungry gulps. When she was done, the Clan was mostly awake. Coughing and sneezing filled her ears until she thought it wouldn't stop.

Nutfoot was guiding a staggering Ravenstem from the warrior's den. The black tom's eyes were glazed and his movements were sluggish and uneven as he coughed on his way to Softear's den. Skypaw drew her ears back as she watched the two cats pass by and she felt a pang of fear. *What will happen if cats start dying?* She recalled Bluetail and Rippleblaze's deaths and she shuddered, heading for the camp entrance. As she waited for her mentor, Bluepaw and Wisppaw padded up.

"What's going on?" Bluepaw asked, her voice clouded with sleep as she shook out her pelt, making a scrap of moss fall onto the white-covered ground.

"Darkfeather wants us to do some battle training today," Skypaw replied as she lifted her head to peer around the camp for her mentor. *Where did she go?*

Wisppaw shivered as she shook snow from her paws. "We'd better go before our paws freeze to the ground." She grumbled.

"Surely you'd be more excited about learning how to fight, Wisppaw." Rumbled Quailfeather as the tom trotted up, his amber eyes like fire against the snow-bleached ground. He fixed his apprentice with a stern look. "Learning how to fight is honorable in the life of a Clan. Especially when those you fight might fight to the death."

Bluepaw's eyes widened. "But killing in battle is against the warrior code!" She exclaimed, looking at Skypaw then back to Quailfeather.

The small gray cat nodded in grim agreement. "Yes, but sometimes killing a cat in order to save your life is necessary when it comes to fighting cats from outside the warrior code." He flicked his ears. "Even so, it's key to never kill others unless there's no other option."

Wisppaw and Bluepaw nodded obediently. "Yes, Quailfeather." Mewed the she-cats as Skypaw spotted Darkfeather exiting the

medicine cat's den.

Instantly alarmed, she sprang to her paws as her mentor padding their way. "What's the matter?" She asked, worried that Darkfeather may have gotten sick.

Darkfeather looked mildly amused and shook her head. "Nothing," she replied. Skypaw tensed at the slight dryness in her voice and she looked into her eyes, as though searching for something. "Let's get going, shall we?" She dipped her head to Quailfeather, who grunted in agreement.

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"When training with your Clanmates," Quailfeather began once they reached the open moor that flattened and created a small area to battle train on flat land. "It's essential to keep your claws sheathed to not inflict unneeded wounds. Understand?"

Skypaw nodded. "What will we do first?" She asked, suddenly excited to start training despite the cold that bit at her pads and stung her ears.

Darkfeather waved her tail. "You and Bluepaw will spar while Quailfeather and I will watch." She instructed and nodded to the two apprentices. "We will be paying close attention to your strategy and how you counter your enemies' attacks."

Bluepaw raised her tail and Darkfeather looked at her questioningly. "What happens when one of us wins?" Her eyes burned with energy and Skypaw felt her paws prick with unease. How could she fight her best friend? She knew Bluepaw could easily outmatch her in a real battle, but they'd fought each other before, the first time she'd ever met a Clan cat. That was moons ago, and even now, she knew all too well the strength in the dark she-cat's muscles and claws.

"Then you'll go again and see how long you can fight," replied Darkfeather with a flick of her tail as she sat down. Wisppaw pricked her ears as she stood beside her mentor, eagerness brightening her gaze. "Wait for my call."

Skypaw faced Bluepaw, readying her muscles to meet her with whatever she had planned. She was smaller than her friend, which could help her slip out of the way. But Bluepaw had the advantage of having sharper movements and a quicker react time. *I can do this.*

"Go!" At Darkfeather's order, Skypaw shot forward, aiming a blow at Bluepaw's ears. Bluepaw ducked and she missed, skidding on the snow as she tried to regain her footing. Paws slammed into her belly and she gasped, thrown onto her back with Bluepaw towering over her, a paw on her chest.

She writhed under her weight and kicked the she-cat off with her hind paws. Scrambling to her feet, Bluepaw bore down on Skypaw with blows that left her reeling. Skypaw dodged to one side, narrowly avoiding a paw to the cheek and instead took it on her shoulder. She sank her teeth into her tail and pulled her to the ground, struggling to get her paws to pin Bluepaw down.

Paws wrapped around her hind legs and she hit the ground on her chest with a yelp. Bluepaw had her paws on her shoulders, panting as she held her down. Skypaw clawed at the snow, but she couldn't get up as Bluepaw's greater weight pinned her firmly to the ground. She went limp, and Bluepaw lessened her grip. With a grunt of effort, she surged upward, dislodging Bluepaw as she stumbled backward in surprise. Whirling around, she landed a blow on her cheek, driving her back as she rained blow after energizing blow on her head and face.

"Stop!" Quailfeather ordered and Skypaw looked over at the gray warrior as he waved his tail. Bluepaw and Skypaw panted hard as both mentors padded towards them, their eyes shining. "That was a good move, Skypaw." Praised the small tom as he nodded to the apprentice. "Pretending to be beaten and then fending off your opponent is a good skill."

"I would have gotten her if I didn't slide on the snow," huffed Bluepaw as she scuffed at the snow.

Darkfeather flicked her shoulder with her tail. "You're bigger than Skypaw, which helped you overpower her in many cases." She meowed. "But, you got cocky when you had her on the ground. If

you do that in a real fight, then you could get killed."

Bluepaw stared at her paws in silent frustration and Skypaw twitched her whiskers. Bluepaw was acting like this spar meant the world to her. *It's just training,* Skypaw thought with a twitch of her nose. *What's got her tail in a twist?*

"Wisppaw," Darkfeather looked back at the gray apprentice. "Do you want to have a shot at beating Skypaw?" She asked.

Wisppaw nodded eagerly, looking teasingly at Skypaw. "If I beat you," she purred. "Don't take it too seriously."

Skypaw narrowed her eyes playfully at her friend and lashed her tail from side to side. "I could beat you with my eyes closed!" She sneered.

Quailfeather's whiskers twitched in amusement. "We'll see how well that goes," he chuckled and backed away. "Come on, Bluepaw. I don't think you want to miss this."

As they moved out of the way, Skypaw tensed her muscles and she prepared for Wisppaw to attack. At Darkfeather's command, Wisppaw and Skypaw started to circle each other, their tails lashing and eyes narrowed.

Wisppaw struck first with a blow to Skypaw's shoulder. As she moved out of the way to dodge, Wisppaw reared on her hind legs and swatted at her ears. She was knocked to one side, and scrabbled to her paws, watching as Wisppaw charged.

"Go Skypaw!" Cheered Bluepaw as she watched with Quailfeather and Darkfeather. "You can do this!"

Something lit in her chest as she felt determined to fulfill her friend's wish to see her win. Digging her hind claws into the snow, she reared up and met Wisppaw blow for blow. She launched herself at her opponent, and they locked into a fierce wrestling match as the hissed and snarled.

Wisppaw hooked her hind paws into her belly and heaved her

away, sending her rolling in the snow. As she got to her paws, she leapt onto her back and clung on like a burr. Skypaw lurched forward, but landed on her side at the last moment. Together, they rolled down the hill, screeching and flailing as the fight broke apart.

"Wisppaw! Skypaw!" Darkfeather's horrified call send chills down Skypaw's spine as she and Wisppaw wailed in fear. In her tumbling, she caught sight of the stream and she let out a yelp. *We're going to fall in!* She realized. Thinking fast, she hooked her claws into Wisppaw's fur and sank her teeth into her scruff. Heaving her up, she skidded to a halt just as Skypaw went over the edge and splashed into the freezing water.

Water flooded her ears and she twisted, trying to get a sense of her surroundings. All around her was dark and cold, as though something were dragging at her with unseen claws. She flailed her paws, unable to see the world above her as her senses were fogged with the icy water.

Her pelt felt fluffy and she hazily saw through the dark water the glow of blue eyes heading for her. She felt panic spark through her as she realized a cat must've jumped in after her. She tried to yowl, but bubbles floated in front of her muzzle and her chest tightened with fear.

Teeth sank into her scruff and claws dug into her pelt as she was suddenly heaved upward. She gasped as her head broke the surface and she clawed at the water, coughing and shivering as she was dragged out. Once she was on solid ground, she spluttered and coughed up several mouthfuls of water.

"Skypaw! Are you alright?" Came the voice of her mentor as she padded around her. Water streamed from her thick fur and Skypaw shuddered. Coldness gripped her like claws and she shivered uncontrollably.

"We should get her to Softear and Shadepaw," meowed Quailfeather as he skidded to a halt beside the apprentice and sniffed at her fur. Even though his strict, firm personality was there, Skypaw detected a subtle concern and fear swelling in his mew.

Skypaw's head drooped in exhaustion as she trembled on the ground, cold and tired. "I want to sleep," she mewed pitifully as she looked up at Darkfeather.

Her mentor's paw brushed against her cheek. "You can sleep when we get you cleared by Softear and Shadepaw." She meowed, her voice worried. By the time she'd finished speaking, Skypaw's eyes were already closing and she drifted off into a dreamless doze.

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"She'll be just fine, Bluepaw."

"Are you sure? I saw her tumble into that stream!"

"I promise you, she'll be fine. She's just tired and cold. Leave her be and I'll call you if she gets any worse."

The words roused Skypaw out of her bleary and dreadful sleep and she blinked open her eyes to find herself in Softear's makeshift den at the edge of the camp. It was night time, and she could hear the worried voice of Bluepaw and the calmer, more soothing voice of Softear.

She ached all over and she could see the full moon glowing coldly over her head. Disappointment flooded through her like the water as it wreathed around her as she realized she was missing the Gathering. Skypaw lifted her head from her front paws and struggled to her paws, but fell heavily back down with a grunt.

"Skypaw?" Bluepaw's mew was worried as paws thundered in the den and she was suddenly smothered in dark gray fur as Bluepaw whimpered in relief. "You're okay!"

Softear joined them in the den, amusement and exhaustion in her green eyes. "I told you she would be okay," she purred, her voice rattling with lack of water and sleep. "That was quite the swim you took. You're lucky you don't have whitecough or greencough."

"What happened?" Skypaw croaked, her mouth felt dry and she cringed at the helplessness that echoed in her ears.

Softear nosed a ball of wet moss toward her and began to explain what had happened as she drank. "Darkfeather pulled you out before you could drown or get sick," she finished with a glance over her shoulder.

At the mention of her mentor, Skypaw pricked her ears. "Is Darkfeather okay?" She asked, her voice stronger now that she'd had some water. "Is she sick?"

Softear shook her head, much to Skypaw's relief. "Darkfeather was in and out of the water quick enough not to get too soaked." She twitched her tail tip. "How do you feel?"

"Like I could sleep for moons," Skypaw responded. Her limbs felt like lead as she tried to move, but she also weightless. "How long have I been asleep?"

"Only a few hours," Bluepaw mewed and twitched her whiskers. "Wisppaw and Quailfeather were surprised that you threw yourself in that stream."

"I didn't want Wisppaw to get soaked," Skypaw retorted with a twitch of her ears. "If she did, she could've gotten sick and then we'd both be in here."

The cream-furred medicine cat looked at her thoughtfully. "It was a good thing what you did," she mewed gently, as though her words had more meaning than praising the apprentice. "We'll let you get some sleep. Bluepaw, go report to Redstar that Skypaw is okay. Then, go to your nest." She ordered.

Bluepaw rose to her paws, looking worriedly at Skypaw. "Can't I sleep here tonight?" She protested. "I can keep her warm."

Softear gave her a stern look. "Skypaw and regulate her own body heat," she meowed firmly. "No more arguing. You both need rest. Out you go." When Bluepaw headed out of the den in defeat, Softear looked at Skypaw with interest. "She's been worried about you since you passed out by the water." She blinked. "You're fortunate to have friends like her." Without another word, she spun around and followed Bluepaw out of the den.

Chapter 10

"Sparkpaw! Cloverpaw! Brownpaw!" Cheered Skypaw as she looked at the three new apprentices. Sparkpaw was beaming at Skypaw as her littermates took in the cheering.

"We're going to have to have the tunneling apprentices expand the den." Bluepaw mewed in Skypaw's ear, making it twitch in amusement. "It's getting too crowded for my liking!"

Skypaw had to agree. Despite the cold leafbare, she felt warm that Sparkpaw was an apprentice with her. "Marshpaw and Juniperpaw will have a fun time with that," she replied with a glance over at her brothers.

Juniperpaw was sitting beside Slatepaw, and Marshpaw was chatting with Woolpaw and Fawnpaw, his eyes bright as he boasted about chasing a rabbit into the claws of Thrushleaf.

"It was huge!" Boasted the white apprentice as he used his paws to exaggerate the rabbit's size. "Twice the size of a new apprentice, and faster than any of us! But I managed to flush it to Thrushleaf's claws and we caught it."

"Wow," breathed Fawnpaw as she pressed against Marshpaw, her eyes glowing with excitement and awe. "You're such a good hunter, Marshpaw. We should go hunting sometime."

Skypaw scoffed to herself and muttered in Bluepaw's ear. "She's mooning over him like a fox would to a piece of prey." She remarked.

Bluepaw snickered. "Yeah, when will they have kits?" As the pair of them laughed, Sparkpaw trotted up, her eyes bright and tails waving.

"I'm an apprentice now, Skypaw!" Sparkpaw declared as she halted in front of the older apprentices. "We can train together now!"

"Yeah," Skypaw mewed and touched noses with the tabby she-cat. "Wait until you have to pull ticks from the elders," she teased. "You'll wish you still were a kit."

Sparkpaw rolled her eyes and waved her tail. "I'm just glad that I'm an apprentice finally." She looked between Bluepaw and Skypaw. "When will you two become warriors?"

Bluepaw's eyes flashed with irritation and she sniffed. "A new apprentice shouldn't be worrying about older apprentice's business," she retorted hotly as she lashed her tail. "You should be joining your mentor for the tour around the territory, Sparkpaw."

Sparkpaw's eyes flashed and she glared at Bluepaw. "Keep your fur on, Bluepaw." She snapped and looked back at Skypaw, her eyes softening. "See you later, Skypaw." With a final toxic glare at Bluepaw, she spun around and stalked toward Lakespots.

When she left, Skypaw turned to Bluepaw, her eyes wide. "Why were you so hostile towards her?" She asked, her voice stunned. "She was just asking a question."

Bluepaw turned on her, her eyes flashing. "New apprentices should worry about themselves and their training," she growled. "Sparkpaw shouldn't poke her nose where it doesn't belong." With a snort of anger, she spun around and stalked away.

Skypaw watched in confused silence as her friend padded to join Fernpaw, who had recovered from his small cold and was now talking with Hawkpool. The queen was back in the nursery, suckling her second litter of two toms, Sapkit and Saplingkit. Both littermates were born a few days ago and were barely old enough to leave the safety of the nursery.

Wolfleaf had his tail curled protectively around his mate while Hawkpool's tail curled around their youngest kits. Their eyes shone with love and pride as they talked with Fernpaw.

"Hey, Skypaw," mewed the voice of Wisppaw as she padded up to touch noses with the she-cat. Skypaw murmured a greeting, pelt still prickling as she thought of Bluepaw's hostility to Sparkpaw.

"Want to go hunting? Myrtlepaw, Greenpaw, Pigeonpaw, and Parsleypaw were going to go and I thought you'd want to as well."

Skypaw nodded and rose to her paws, following the gray she-cat toward the camp entrance. She stopped, turned her head around, and watched sadly as Bluepaw stormed into the apprentice den.

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Skypaw chased the rabbit across the moor, relishing the exhilaration that flooded through her veins. She snapped her jaws at the hare's hind legs and it yelped. As she spotted Myrtlepaw ahead and ready to spring out from behind the boulder she was hiding behind, Skypaw funneled the bounty to the marbled tabby she-cat.

Myrtlepaw leaped out of her hiding place and the rabbit squealed in terror. She knocked it to the side and held a paw on its side before killing it with a swift, clean bite to its neck.

Skypaw slowed to a trot, panting as she looked at the killed prey. "Nice one," she gasped as she fought for air. The rabbit wasn't very plump like she'd hoped, but it would make a good meal for the kits.

"Skypaw! Myrtlepaw!" Parsleypaw's call alerted both she-cats. The pale tom bounded up to them, his eyes wide. "Come on!" He urged, his yellow eyes huge like twin moons.

"What's the matter?" Demanded Skypaw as she looked at the younger tom.

"ThunderClan cats are at the border," he explained rapidly as he led them to down the moor. "Pigeonpaw, Wisppaw, and Greenpaw are there. They have their prey with them and the ThunderClan cats are accusing them of stealing."

Skypaw ran ahead of Parsleypaw and Mrytlepaw as she tore down the slope, seeing the apprentices at the bottom with their backs arched in defensive positions. "Stop!" She yowled, bounding down and skidding to a halt behind Greenpaw.

"Look who it is," sneered the same white she-cat with gray patches

that Skypaw had fought the day she became an apprentice of WindClan. "The kittypet returns."

Skypaw bared her teeth. "And the coward returns," she countered with a lash of her tail. Looking over her shoulder, Myrtlepaw and Parsleypaw came up behind their denmates, their eyes wide. Turning back to the ThunderClan cats, she added. "Leave and this will be forgotten." She spat.

A black-and-white tom blinked at her in mock fear. "Or what?" He hissed, his claws sliding out and pricking the earth. "What will a group of apprentices do to a bunch of warriors?"

It was Greenpaw who snarled in return. "Rip you to shreds," He threatened and flashed a glare at the white she-cat.

Skypaw waved her tail at her denmate and flashed a warning look at him before addressing the ThunderClan cats. "If you do not leave," she threatened, taking a step toward the border. At once, the ThunderClan cats tensed. "Then we will make you leave."

A solid gray tom bared his teeth. "I'd like to see you try," he growled and bunched his muscles. "ThunderClan! Attack!" He flew over the border, claws extended as he tackled Skypaw and threw her onto her back.

"WindClan!" Yowled Myrtlepaw from where she stood beside Parsleypaw. "Attack!" The group of apprentices flooded the ThunderClan warriors and started locking into battle.

Skypaw heaved the gray tom off her and raked his shoulder with her claws before twisting and sinking her teeth into his forepaw. Wrenching her head around, the tom fell to the ground with a yowl of anger and Skypaw clawed at his sides.

Greenpaw's gray-and-white fur flashed out of the corner of her eye and she looked up to see the large tom throw the white she-cat to the ground with a swipe at her ears.

Pain flared through her leg as the tom ripped at her leg and she screeched in pain. Staggering backward, the tom scrambled to his

paws and slashed at her chest, managing to strike her twice before being chased over the border by Wisppaw and Pigeonpaw.

Skypaw looked around at the wrestling cats and ran toward where Myrtlepaw was struggling underneath the black-and-white tom. She leaped onto his back, ripping into his fur as she churned her hind paws into his back and sank her teeth deep into the side of his neck.

The tom stumbled, releasing his grip on Myrtlepaw and gripped Skypaw's sides with his claws and flung her off before turning tail and racing after his Clanmate.

A gurgling yowl split the air as Skypaw watched Greenpaw lunging for the white she-cat's throat. She let out a yowl to stop him from dealing the blow but his teeth sank in and the she-cat writhed, clawing desperately at his chest. He held on until her struggling lessened and she twitched until she was still.

"Greenpaw!" Skypaw bounded over to the tom as he released his hold on her neck and took a step back. She stared down at the limp body of the she-cat in dismay and she felt sick. She'd watched her denmate, an *apprentice,* kill another cat in battle.

"Wh-what have you done?" Pigeonpaw gasped as him and Wisppaw jogged back over to see what happened. "ThunderClan will never forgive us now!"

"StarClan save us!" Wailed Myrtlepaw as she pressed against Parsleypaw, who looked stunned.

Wisppaw turned to Skypaw, looked queasy. "What will we do?" She whispered, her voice shaking. "We can't leave her here."

Skypaw nodded, a lump growing in her throat as she stared longer at the she-cat's body. "I know," she murmured. Dread hardened like a stone in her belly as she looked at the other apprentices. "We'll take her back to camp and report to Redstar." She considered. "He'll know what to do with ThunderClan."

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"What happened?"

"Great StarClan!"

"Who are they carrying?"

Skypaw blocked out the shocked murmurs of her Clanmates as she and the other apprentices brought the she-cat back to the WindClan camp. Her heart felt heavy as she watched Redstar slip out of the nursery.

"What happened, Skypaw?" He demanded as he took in the scene in front of him.

"We were hunting on the moor when a group of ThunderClan cats accused Pigeonpaw, Greenpaw, and Wisppaw of stealing the prey they'd caught." Skypaw began, her tail indicating to each cat in turn. "I told them to leave but they kept taunting us. They attacked; and one of their warriors was killed in the battle." She hung her head. "We didn't want this to happen."

Outraged yowls came from the cats around them.

"Good riddance!"

"Who dares to attack a group of hunting apprentices?"

"We should show ThunderClan that one warrior wouldn't be the only one to die!"

"*Silence!*" Redstar yowled and the Clan fell silent around them. He fixed each cat with a stern, but worried look. "Who killed the warrior?" He asked, his voice tight with anger.

Before any cat could speak, Skypaw blurted out. "I did!" Gasping followed her words and she forced herself to meet Redstar's shocked gaze. "She was going to kill Greenpaw, so I had no other choice. Punish me as you wish, but I believe I did what was right."

Redstar looked stunned, but he collected himself quickly. "Well," he began, looking uncertain. "I will not punish you for this, Skypaw. However, I will have to make sure you are not seen at the

Gatherings. For now, you will not attend the next three Gatherings for your safety." He dipped his head. "Thank you for saving Greenpaw. This ThunderClan cat will lie in peace in our territory now." As he finished speaking, the elders shuffled forward and started to prepare the fallen she-cat for burial.

The Clan dispersed into hushed groups as they sent looks over at Skypaw as she headed for the apprentice's den.

"Skypaw," Darkfeather's voice made her look up and she saw her mentor padding towards her, her blue eyes dark with concern. "A word?"

Skypaw let out a long sigh and nodded. She headed after her mentor as she led her around the apprentice's den entrance and ducked inside. It was empty inside, and Skypaw felt a pang of fear as Darkfeather faced her.

"Is it true you killed that ThunderClan warrior?" Darkfeather asked, holding her gaze without flinching.

Skypaw blinked and took a step back in surprise. "You just heard me tell the Clan that I did," she meowed in a tone that was a bit less respectful to her mentor. "Why question what I said?"

Darkfeather twitched her ear. "Because I don't believe you," she replied and went on before Skypaw could say anything. "I saw the look in your eyes when you said you killed that she-cat. You didn't have the guilt or regret of a cat who killed another cat in battle."

"So?" Skypaw scoffed, trying to sound dismissive.

"So," her mentor took a pace towards her. "Who really killed that she-cat?"

Skypaw's heart was pounding so hard in her chest, she thought Darkfeather could hear it. She shook her head and took a deep breath as she met her mentor's eyes. "Greenpaw." She answered tersely.

Darkfeather was quiet for a moment before she slowly nodded. "You took the blame so he didn't get into trouble," she guessed, to which

Skypaw nodded. "Very bold of you, but I doubt Redstar will hold it against you."

"ThunderClan might," Skypaw meowed bitterly as she stared at her paws.

"Maybe," agreed her mentor. "But we will protect you and Greenpaw should they do anything about it." Darkfeather held a paw under her apprentice's chin and forced her to meet her gaze. "We're your Clanmates, Skypaw." She mewed gently. "We'll protect you."

For a heartbeat, Skypaw wanted to agree, but something clawed at her heart and she shook her mentor off. "Sure," she grunted and shouldered past her. "If you don't mind, I'd like to get some sleep."

As she curled in her nest away from Darkfeather, her mentor let out a gentle sigh. "One day you'll understand that we are not your enemies, Skypaw." She meowed under her breath, but Skypaw could catch her words. "Whether that day comes sooner or later, is any cat's guess." Darkfeather left the den, leaving Skypaw alone.

Was what her mentor said true? Were the cats who surrounded her not her enemies? They had tried to claw her pelt off when she joined the Clan, she hadn't forgotten about that. She shoved her face under her paws and groaned. Eventually, she gave in to the blackness that tugged at the corners of her eyes and she fell asleep.

Chapter 11

"By the powers of StarClan, I grant you your warrior names." Redstar mewed at the top of the Fallen Tree as he looked down at the four apprentices. "From this moment on, you will be known as Bluefeather, Wispwren, Greenscar, and Skytail. StarClan honors your strength, courage, and determination and we welcome you all as full warriors of WindClan."

"Bluefeather! Wispwren! Greenscar! Skytail!"

Skytail turned to face her fellow warriors, her chest puffed out in overwhelming pride. All around her, her Clanmates cheered as the leafbare sun shone over their heads. It was the middle of the coldest season, and Redstar had talked to each of the mentors and concluded that their apprentices would be made warriors. Skytail couldn't have felt better as her Clan cheered her new name.

"Meeting dismissed," Redstar meowed and turned away, padding toward Morningshine where their kits were talking excitedly amongst themselves.

Sparkpaw bounded up to Skytail, her eyes bright with admiration. "Congratulations!" She meowed enthusiastically as she twitched her whiskers excitedly. "You're finally a warrior!"

Skytail looked at her trusting, happy face and let out a purr. "Yeah," she mewed happily and looked over at Bluefeather, Greenscar, and Wispwren. *I've earned it, right?*

Over four moons ago, when Sparkpaw became an apprentice and when Greenscar killed that ThunderClan warrior, Skytail forced herself to go through leafbare without complaining. More kits were born, filling up the nursery. As the older kits became apprentices, Skytail was glad to leave the crowded apprentice den. The new apprentices, Twigpaw, Eaglepaw, Furzepaw, and Haypaw were chattering amongst themselves, looking excitedly at the new warriors. They'd been made warriors a half-moon ago and Skytail

felt a pang of affection as they met her eyes and beamed at her.

"Skytail?" Sparkpaw waved a paw in front of her face and Skytail jerked back to the apprentice. She wouldn't get her warrior name for moons, but Skytail was eager to see the she-cat get her full name.

"Sorry, yeah?" Skytail mewed apologetically as she dipped her head to Sparkpaw.

The younger she-cat was waving her tail to the prey-heap. As they headed over to the pile, Skytail caught sight of Darkfeather rubbing her muzzle against Brackenmist's cheek.

Their kits, Martenkit, Mistykit, Shellkit, Brindlekit, Weaselkit, Smokekit, Poppykit, and Graykit were chasing each other at their parents' paws. Skytail, along with the rest of the Clan, was shocked at how many kits Darkfeather had. It was unusual for a she-cat to have more than five kits in a single litter, but Darkfeather had eight.

"It was a hard birth," Softear had said after the kits had been born. "She's very weak, but she and her kits are okay."

Sparkpaw padded alongside Skytail as she bumped her side against the new warrior's. "How does it feel to be a warrior?" She asked curiously, her eyes wide.

Skytail let out a purr. "It feels great," she replied fervently, her eyes closing. When she opened her eyes once more, Sparkpaw was looking up at her with gentle blue eyes. "You'll be a warrior soon, too."

Sparkpaw let out a sigh and looked over at her father as Redstar talked to Logstorm. "Hopefully," she murmured. "Fernpaw and Slatepaw are already the senior apprentices, maybe he'll make them warriors so he can get to us quicker."

Skytail lapped at her head affectionately and gazed at her fondly. "Don't worry," she soothed as she padded by and picked up a rabbit.

"When you're a warrior, everything will feel great. Your apprenticeship will feel like it went by quicker than it did."

Sparkpaw didn't look convinced, but she followed Skytail as she carried the prey to the top of the hill where they always ate. Settling down, they took turns in taking bites and talked about apprenticeships and becoming mentors.

Skytail saw Bluefeather and Sapkit playing outside the nursery. Her friend's eyes were glimmering with excitement as she played tag with the young tom. With a pang of sadness, Skytail recalled Bluefeather's snappiness when Sparkpaw had asked them about becoming warriors. She'd been rude and abrasive, which confused Skytail rather than concerned. *She's probably adjusting to having more siblings,* she figured.

Since Darkfeather had announced she was expecting Brackenmist's kits instead of Breezeblaze's, Bluefeather was always irritable and on-edge. Skytail wondered what would happen if Breezeblaze got back together with Darkfeather, then shut it down quickly. *They'll never get back together.*

Skytail flopped onto her back and looked over at Sparkpaw as the apprentice did the same. "Say," she mewed after a few moments of comfortable silence. Sparkpaw looked at her, her ears twitching. "Do you want to practice your battle moves?"

Sparkpaw's eyes lit up with eagerness and worry. "On you?" Skytail nodded. "What if I hurt you?"

"You shouldn't," Skytail responded sternly. "Because we'll be keeping our claws sheathed and we won't be ripping each other's pelts off." She got to her paws and looked down at Sparkpaw. "I mean unless you want to get into a fight with ThunderClan or SkyClan."

Sparkpaw snorted and rolled over, leaping to her paws. "I can beat you any day," she mewed challengingly. Padding toward the gorse wall, Skytail bunched her muscles, preparing herself for Sparkpaw's assault. Sparkpaw faced her, her eyes narrowed and blazing with a determination that Skytail had to admire as she faced off a new warrior.

"Last chance to back down, Sparkpaw." Skytail taunted as she dropped into a half-crouch. Sparkpaw let out a grunt and lunged forward, her teeth bared into a loud snarl. Skytail dodged to the left, evading the apprentice as she lashed out with a paw and stood behind her, waiting as she whirled around. "I thought you wanted to win. You fight like a blind kit."

Sparkpaw let out a shriek and leaped for Skytail. Skytail narrowed her eyes as she saw the glint of her claws as they unsheathed and she narrowed her eyes. Rearing on her hind legs, she struck Sparkpaw's cheek, making her hiss and dive for her belly. Skytail gasped as she toppled onto her back, ending up with Sparkpaw over her. Her paws pressed against her chest, trying to push the apprentice off.

The she-cat pummeled the warrior with her paws. Skytail gasped as her claws lanced through her fur and sliced the flesh on her chest. She could see the light of battle in Sparkpaw's blue eyes and felt a pang of admiration. Jerking her shoulder to the side, Skytail thrust Sparkpaw away with a cuff over the ear. She rolled over and jumped to her paws. Sparkpaw let out a battle yowl and tackled Skytail, sending them both rolling down the hill, hissing, and spitting.

"Skytail!" Bluefeather's shocked call pulled the new warrior out of her tussle with Sparkpaw and she lurched backward, breaking apart from the apprentice. Before Skytail could catch her breath, Bluefeather launched herself at Sparkpaw, claws unsheathed.

"Bluefeather, no!" Skytail gasped as Bluefeather tackled Sparkpaw to the ground, her claws digging relentlessly into her flesh. Skytail watched in sick horror as Bluefeather lunged for Sparkpaw's throat, but came up short at Darkfeather's horrified wail.

"What are you doing?" Cried Darkfeather as she shielded her new kits from the fighting. Martenkit looked over his mother's tail as she herded them behind her. His blue eyes, so much like Bluefeather's, gleamed with awe and interest. "Get away from her!"

Bluefeather scrambled away from Sparkpaw, who wheezed. Skytail dashed over to the apprentice and helped her to her paws and

began nosing her all over.

"Are you okay?" She mewed worriedly, her eyes wide like moons. "Did she hurt you?"

"N-no," Sparkpaw mewed shakily as she looked over at Bluefeather, who was staring in shock. "I-I'm fine." She pressed against Skytail, who curled her tail around her back comfortingly.

"What were you thinking?" Skytail snapped at Bluefeather, rage flooding her as she glared at her friend. "Attacking an apprentice?"

Bluefeather looked stunned and confused and Skytail narrowed her eyes. "Sh-she was attacking you!" She protested as she sheathed her claws. "I-I thought you needed help!"

"We were practicing, you rabbit-brain!" Skytail spat and Bluefeather took an alarmed step back. "You see Sparkpaw and I training and your first instinct is to tear her throat out!" She was shouting now, anger and hostility ringing through the camp as the Clan watched on in silent horror. She dug her claws into the earth and bared her teeth. "What kind of a Clanmate does that?"

Bluefeather's eyes widened and then narrowed as she bristled in anger. "I wasn't going to kill her!" She retorted, her voice riddled with defiance and deep regret.

"How was I supposed to know that?" Skytail snorted and shook her head in disbelief. "You went for her throat, Bluefeather. Could you blame me if I thought you'd kill her?"

Bluefeather laid her ears back and growled, but didn't respond. Instead, she spun on her heels and stalked away through the watching Clan out of the hollow.

Skytail watched her friend go with a heavy sigh. Nosing Sparkpaw to her paws, she guided her to the apprentice's den, which was full of Fernpaw, Slatepaw, Mrytlepaw, and Parsleypaw talking in hushed whispers. When Skytail and Sparkpaw ducked inside, they fell into silence. The warrior met their eyes sternly. "Out, all of you." She ordered and the apprentices bustled out of the den,

scrambling away from Skytail and Sparkpaw.

"Thanks," Sparkpaw mewed quietly as Skytail eased her into her nest. Skytail settled down beside her and rasped her tongue over her pelt. "You didn't have to make them leave." She gazed at where her denmates scurried away, her eyes distant and unreadable.

Skytail's voice softened. "I just wanted to make sure you're alright without their questions," she explained gently and she peered into Sparkpaw's eyes. Something about the way the apprentice looked at her made something in her chest flutter and she swallowed down a purr. "How do you feel?"

Sparkpaw shrugged, her eyes dark. "I feel...weird." She said finally, looking up at Skytail with confused blue eyes. Skytail tipped her head to the side, urging Sparkpaw to go on. The apprentice sighed and looked at her paws, her ears twitching in irritation. "I can't explain it."

"Well, when you can," Skytail mewed supportingly. "Let me know." With a final lick around her ears, Skytail rose to her paws and padded out of the apprentice's den. The sunlight bathed her back, warming her pelt as she watched Sapkit, Saplingkit, Muddykit, Gravelkit, and Sandykit playing in the hollow. She noticed Driftbird watching them with tired eyes and strolled over. "Hey." She mewed, startling the queen.

"Oh," Driftbird meowed, licking her chest fur in embarrassment. "Hi, Skytail." The queen looked uncomfortable and distressed and Skytail sat down next to her, overlooking the kits as they played.

"What's the matter, Driftbird?" Skytail asked gently, glancing at the she-cat out of the corner of her eye. When she looked at her in alarm, she explained. "Your eyes give away a lot of your emotion."

Driftbird sighed heavily and stared at her paws. "It-it's Wollyfire," she confessed after a moment of silence. Skytail pricked her ears and tilted her head. "He told me that he doesn't want to be a father to Gravelkit, Muddykit, and Sandykit." She dug her claws into the ground and added in a hiss. "Even though it was *his* idea to start a family." She sounded rather bitter, which startled Skytail. She'd

always thought of the she-cat as kind, friendly, and fierce. Not bitter.

"You mean to tell me, that Wollyfire *pressured* you into having kits?" Skytail mewed incredulously. She'd always thought it was up to the she-cat when to have kits, but apparently, Wollyfire took that away from her. Rage boiled in Skytail's blood and she couldn't help but mutter. "Selfish tom."

Driftbird looked slightly amused, but her ears were drooped and she watched her kits sadly as they wrestled with each other. "I love my kits, I really do, but I don't want Wollyfire to abandon them. They love him as much as I do." She broke off, her tone turning bitter. "He doesn't deserve them."

Skytail hesitated, wondering what to say to ease the troubled queen's nerves. She took a breath and flicked her tail. "Then keep him away from them," she mewed, her voice stronger than she expected. Driftbird glanced questioningly at her as she went on. "If he doesn't want the kits he fathers, then don't let him talk to them."

Driftbird snorted in contempt. "Easier said than done, Skytail." She grumbled but nodded nonetheless. "Thanks, though. I'll do my best." Suddenly, her eyes brightened and she looked at Skytail. "They'll be made apprentices soon."

Skytail pricked her ears. *Maybe I can mentor one.* She thought, but shook her head. *I* just *became a warrior. Redstar won't make me a mentor right off the bat.* "That's great, Driftbird." She purred enthusiastically. "Who will be their mentors?"

Driftbird shrugged, watching as Muddykit chased Saplingkit around Sapkit and Sandykit. "Who knows? That's for Redstar to decide."

Skytail dipped her head and got to her paws. She crossed the hollow until she was standing before the Fallen Tree. Taking a deep breath, she ducked inside. "Redstar?" She called in a hushed tone.

"Come in," came the worried reply of the WindClan leader. As Skytail slipped inside, the tom faced her. "What can I help you with, Skytail?"

The she-cat took a breath. "I want to train one of Driftbird's kits when they become of apprentice age," she mewed. When Redstar's eyes widened she went on. "I know I just became a warrior, but I want to prove my worth in WindClan. I don't want to be the cat who sits around, waiting for something to happen. I want to be as useful as I possibly can, whether it involves me training an apprentice or not."

Redstar was quiet for a brief moment, pondering the words of the young she-cat. "You're rather young to be getting an apprentice," he considered. Turning his yellow gaze on Skytail, he added. "I'll think about it. I'm glad you want to mentor an apprentice, but I will have to talk to Wollyfire and Driftbird. You are dismissed."

Skytail dipped her head to her leader and padded out of the den, her head held high. The Clan was getting ready to go to sleep and Logstorm was sending out the final patrols of the night. She headed over to the deputy and waved her tail in greeting. "Hello, Logstorm." She mewed.

"Skytail," meowed the deputy as he nodded stiffly. "What do you need?" He asked as he turned to look at the she-cat.

"Can I join one of the evening's patrols?" She asked, her tail tip twitching back and forth eagerly. To her disappointment, Logstorm shook his head.

"You and the new warriors will sit vigil while the rest of the Clan sleeps," he nodded to the camp entrance where Greenscar and Wispwren were already sitting, their backs straight. "You and Bluefeather will be sitting vigil together. Try not to shred each other's ears." Without another word, Logstorm got heftily to his paws and lumbered toward the warrior's den, disappearing inside.

Skytail swallowed as she thought of spending the night awake with Bluefeather. She squared her shoulders and padded to where Wispwren and Greenscar were. Dipping her head in a silent greeting, she settled down next to Bluefeather, who was on the opposite side of the camp entrance.

The night slowly dragged on and Skytail felt her head start to droop

in exhaustion before she jerked up, her eyelids heavy. Rising to her paws, she stretched her stiff limbs one by one, relishing the feeling of them extending before sitting down once again.

"Psst," Bluefeather hissed out of the corner of her mouth. Skytail looked over at her, confused. "Can you cover for me while I get a drink?" The gray she-cat squirmed uncomfortably as she looked desperately at Skytail, her eyes glittering.

Skytail nodded and Bluefeather zipped away, leaving Wispwren gazing across the camp entrance in confusion. "She had to get a drink," she whispered and Wispwren nodded. Facing the open moor, the new warrior sat in silence while she waited for the sun to rise and for Bluefeather to get back.

It was nearly dawn when Bluefeather finally returned, looking freshly-groomed and smelling of heather and gorse. Skytail shot her an irritated and questioningly tired look but decided against talking to her. *Whatever she was doing, she'll claw my ears off if I ask.* She sighed, her shoulders straightening as she watched the sun slowly creep into the sky. Dew sparkled on the pale-yellow grass as Skytail closed her eyes briefly, taking in the silence.

Pawsteps approaching them alerted the warrior and she looked over her shoulder as Redstar padded out of the camp and faced the four warriors. All of them straightened as their leader addressed them. "Your vigil is over," he rumbled as he looked at each warrior. "You may go to the warrior's den, or join a patrol."

Skytail rose to her paws and stretched, yawning loudly. "That was a nightmare," she mewed, looking over at Wispwren and Greenscar.

"Tell me about it," Greenscar grumbled as he shook out his pelt. "I wanted to sleep so badly, but someone kept me awake." He shot Wispwren a scorching glance, but the she-cat shrugged.

"You can't sleep during your vigil," she explained simply and she looked over at Skytail. "Do you want to go hunting? We can catch something good for ourselves and the elders." Padding to her side, Wispwren bumped against Skytail's side. "We always were a good hunting team." She added, her eyes sparkling with eagerness.

Skytail let out another big yawn and stretched again. Shaking out her thin fur, she looked at Wispwren. "Sure," she meowed and saw her friend brighten. Turning to Greenscar and Bluefeather, she added. "Either of you want to come with?" She asked.

Greenscar shook his head, the scars on his face from when Skytail and he had fought split across his broad face. "I'm going to the warrior's den to sleep." He twitched his ears and looked at Wispwren. "I'll catch you two later, right?"

Skytail was surprised to see his green eyes softening when he looked at Wispwren. "Of course," she replied and looked over at Bluefeather. "What about you? Want to come hunting?"

Bluefeather looked over at her, her eyes glistening like dew and stars. Skytail's heart skipped a beat. "Nah," she meowed and looked over at the camp entrance. "I want to get a nap in before Logstorm gets me on a patrol." She padded into the hollow before any other cat could say more.

"She's being weird," Wispwren meowed as she watched Bluefeather disappear in the camp. Skytail shrugged as she headed down the hill where WindClan's camp resided. Wispwren jogged to her side, her eyes bright. "I feel more energized sitting vigil than I do getting a full night's sleep."

Skytail purred with amusement, but she could feel her fur pricking with exhaustion. "I could still sleep for a moon if I could," she meowed with a flick of her tail. Regardless of her tiredness, she padded alongside Wispwren as they headed down the moor towards the Hunting Plains. The sun rose steadily as the two warriors tasted the air for the tantalizing scent of a rabbit. Wispwren pricked her ears and dropped into a crouch. Following her gaze, Skytail spotted a light gray rabbit grazing a few tail-lengths away. She slipped into a crouch and narrowed her eyes on the quarry. Flicking her ear to Wispwren, she stalked swiftly and silently towards the rabbit.

One of its ears flicked towards her and she froze, keeping her breathing quiet and short as she pinpointed where the rabbit would run when she charged. It looked up, peering around and searching for the end of the world, before finding it in Skytail's eyes. The

warrior could almost hear the panicked, rapid beating of its heart as it turned and bounded away. Digging her claws into the earth, she propelled herself forward and raced after the rabbit. She pelted after the animal, making sure she was guiding it around the plains before making it turn and double back to when Wispwren was waiting.

She slackened her pace as the gray warrior leapt out from behind a boulder. The rabbit squeals in terror before trying to dart away, but Wispwren's paw hooked one of its back legs and it toppled forward, shrieking. Skytail watched in glee as Wispwren pounced on the rabbit and killed it with a quick bite to the neck.

"It put up quite a fight," purred Skytail as she trotted up, feeling breathless. Wispwren looked up from the prey and nodded, panting. "It was a good catch, too. I bet the elders will love it."

Wispwren flicked her tail. "Yeah," she meowed and looked across the moor to the ThunderClan forest. Skytail followed her gaze and saw nothing but trees and the far glimmer of the lake.

"What are you looking at?" She asked, turning her gaze back to her friend. Wispwren seemed so detached and Skytail was confused and worried at the same time. *What is she thinking about?*

Wispwren shook her head, as if to clear it, and smiled at Skytail. "Nothing, I'm fine." She meowed and scooped up the rabbit in her jaws, heading off toward the camp.

Skytail hesitated. She was acting so weird all of a sudden. One moment they were celebrating the catch of the morning and the next Wispwren was acting wistful. *Maybe she just saw something that was gone when I looked.* She decided, but her concern dragged at her paws the entire time they padded back to the camp.

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The whole Clan was awake and doing their duties when they returned. Wispwren bounded away to give the elders the rabbit they'd caught, and Skytail stood in the center of the clearing, pondering what to do. A flash of red tabby fur caught her eye as

Sparkpaw and Myrtlepaw padded from the nursery, their eyes glum.

Skytail bounded over and looked between the two apprentices. "What's the matter?" She asked, falling into step beside Sparkpaw.

"Driftbird and Hawkpool said that we couldn't play with the kits while Darkfeather's kits are still too young and small," Myrtlepaw whined, her eyes flashing. "They're a moon old! We wouldn't hurt them!"

"Yeah," Sparkpaw said, her voice bitter. "We wouldn't lay one claw on a hair on their pelts!" Her tail lashed in irritation. "But of course Driftbird and Hawkpool think that just because we're apprentices, that we'd hurt a bunch of kits."

Skytail had to sympathize with the upset apprentices and she bumped her side against Sparkpaw's. Both apprentices looked at her, their eyes pits of disappointment. "I have an idea," she meowed, her voice light. "Why don't we play?"

Myrtlepaw frowned and Skytail was worried she'd offended the marbled blue-tabby she-cat. "But you're a warrior," she mewed. "You don't play with apprentices."

"I was made a warrior just yesterday," Skytail reminded her gently. "I've still got some kit in me. Besides, I want to enjoy being young before I feel like my bones turn to mouse dust."

Sparkpaw's whiskers twitched at her last remark and her eyes started to brighten. Skytail felt her heart pound in her chest as she watched the two cats nod. "What will we play?" She asked curiously.

Skytail tipped her head back in thought. Suddenly, an idea popped in her mind. She looked at the two she-cats, her paws suddenly pricking with excitement. "Why don't we play tag?" She suggested, to which the apprentices pricked their ears eagerly. "Who wants to be it?"

"I will!" Myrtlepaw meowed and looked at Sparkpaw. "I'll give you both a few moments to get away from me then I'll start chasing

you." Sparkpaw nodded and dashed away, Skytail hot on her tail.

"You go one way," Sparkpaw whispered to the warrior as Myrtlepaw waited. "I'll go the other. She can't chase us both at once."

Skytail nodded, preparing her muscles to run away from the tabby apprentice. Myrtlepaw shot towards them, her paws thumping against the ground as she neared. Skytail leaped out of the way before she could tag her and she watched as she skidded by, her eyes flashing. "You're going to have to do better than that if you want to tag me, Myrtlepaw!" She called.

Myrtlepaw's eyes flashed and she charged toward Skytail, barely missing her tail as she jerked out of the way. She turned her attention to Sparkpaw, who was watching in amusement. "I'm going to get you, Sparkpaw!" She declared as she shot for the red tabby apprentice.

Sparkpaw squealed and tried to run, but Myrtlepaw jabbed her shoulder with a paw before scurrying away. "You rabbit-heart!" The apprentice gasped with mock anger as she ran after Myrtlepaw. Upon seeing that Skytail wasn't doing anything, she altered her course and raced toward the warrior.

"Skytail!" Logstorm's irritated yowl split the air and Sparkpaw's eyes flashed with alarm as she slammed into the warrior, sending them both rolling on the ground and ending with Skytail over Sparkpaw. The deputy was storming toward them, his eyes flashing with annoyance. Skytail scrambled off Sparkpaw, who hurried to her paws, her ears drooping. "Are you a kit, or a fully-grown warrior?" He snapped.

"We were just playing, Logstorm." Myrtlepaw meowed as she trotted up, her fur bristling with indignation. Skytail admired her courage to face the deputy but felt her fur prickle uneasily. "There's no harm in that."

The tom turned on her, making her lay back her ears and hiss. "You are an apprentice, Myrtlepaw." He spat venomously as he looked from Myrtlepaw to Sparkpaw. "Both of you are. There isn't enough sunlight each day for cats to be messing around. You're supposed to

be working."

While Sparkpaw looked at the ground, Skytail sized up the deputy, her eyes narrowed protectively.

"If you haven't noticed," she retorted, causing the brown tom to look at her angrily. "Their mentors aren't looking for them and the elders have been fed. Why not let them have some fun once and a while? They haven't been apprentices for terribly long, they still have the excitement and energy of a kit." Skytail met Logstorm's glare with her own without flinching. "I just got back from hunting with Wispwren, don't you think I deserve some time off after doing my vigil? Besides, every cat has been working hard. We all deserve a break."

Despite her words, Logstorm held his own and his nostrils flared in rage. "Watch your tone, barn cat," he hissed and Skytail's shoulders tensed. No cat had called her that since she became an apprentice. "I am the Clan deputy, you are a new warrior. Do not forget your place."

Skytail lifted her chin, aware of the deputy's burning orange eyes drilling into her fur. "Do not forget that the Clan is watching you, Logstorm." She flashed back, her tail lashing. "One wrong move can mark you forever. Never forget that." Turning to the apprentices, she added. "Come on, let's go get something to eat." Shouldering by Logstorm, she led the way down to the prey-heap.

Once they were out of earshot of Logstorm's fury, Myrtlepaw gawked at her. "That was cool!" She exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with excitement and awe.

Skytail's ears burned with embarrassment. "Thanks," she meowed bashfully, licking her chest fur quickly.

Sparkpaw licked her on the cheek, making her fur heat up even more. "You were very brave to stand up to him like that," she mewed warmly. Her eyes gleamed with pride and Skytail couldn't help but return her gentle smile.

"Thanks," she purred quietly.

Myrtlepaw flashed them a knowing look before clearing her throat. "Anyway," she interrupted, her tail flicking. "I'm going to find Twigpaw and Pigeonpaw. They said that we had to clean out the apprentice's den and that Parsleypaw, Eaglepaw, and Haypaw were going to help." She bounded away across the hollow and ducked inside the apprentice's den.

Skytail picked out two mice for her and Sparkpaw and padded up the mini hill. As they settled down to eat, she flicked her ear to the apprentice. "How big is the den now?" She asked curiously.

Sparkpaw swallowed her bite of the mouse she was eating and blinked. "Quite large," she admitted. "Marshpaw and Juniperpaw are the ones who have to expand it every time it gets too crowded."

Skytail's whiskers twitched as she imagined her littermates having to begrudgingly expand the large den whenever the nests filled up. "How are your denmates?" She took a bite of her mouse and chewed, looking at Sparkpaw.

The she-cat shrugged. "Fernpaw and Slatepaw are as competitive as ever since they're going to be made warriors soon, and Woolpaw and Fawnpaw are trying their best to get their tunneling training down." She screwed up her face in distaste and shuddered. "I don't get how they like being underground. I prefer to have the sun on my back."

Skytail purred with amusement, touching her nose to Sparkpaw's cheek. "Don't worry about them," she meowed, her voice soft as she watched the she-cat tense before relaxing. "You'll be made a warrior soon. When you are, we can go on patrols and hunt together." Her paws fizzled with excitement at the thought of hunting and roaming the moor with Sparkpaw.

Sparkpaw looked affectionately at Skytail, and her heart warmed at the sight of the care and tenderness in her blue eyes. "Yeah," she mewed and shifted closer to the warrior to the point where their pelts brushed. "It'll be great."

As they ate, Skytail began to talk about her vigil with the other new warriors. She described the exhaustion that tugged at her fur, and

the relief she felt when the sun peaked out from behind the horizon. When she concluded her story, the mice were gone and her and Sparkpaw's tails were intertwined together as they laid down side by side. She let out a content sigh as she rested her head on Sparkpaw's shoulder, letting out a soft purr.

Sparkpaw laid her chin on Skytail's paws and smiled warmly. "You were great today," she murmured. "Thank you for playing with us."

Skytail closed her eyes, smiling softly. "Of course," she whispered, loud enough for Sparkpaw to hear. "I'll do anything for you, Sparkpaw." She added quietly.

She didn't mean to fall asleep, but when she opened her eyes, the sun was higher in the sky and she yawned. She realized the Sparkpaw was also asleep, her flanks rising and falling steadily and Skytail found herself watching as her red-and-white tabby sides for a long moment. She looked around the hollow, spotting Darkfeather and Brakenmist sharing a rabbit as their kits suckled at Darkfeather's belly.

Sparkpaw stirred as she moved and Skytail looked at the apprentice. "I-is it dusk?" She murmured, her voice blurry with sleep.

Skytail shook her head in silent amusement. "Not quite," she mewed gently. She licked the she-cat on the head, her ears flicking. "It's just past sunhigh." She rested her chin on Sparkpaw's head, letting out a small purr as Sparkpaw sighed.

"I should probably find Lakespots and see if she wants me to train," she meowed, her voice sounding disappointed. "But, I don't want to leave you." Her eyes flicked up to Skytail and their blue pools turned feather-soft. "Maybe we can stay like this for a few more heartbeats." She purred hopefully.

It was tempting, and Sparkpaw's soft voice sounded so comforting. She nearly closed her eyes again, but she raised her head and gently shook it. "We have to do something productive today."

Sparkpaw groaned, but she lifted her head and peered around the

camp. "What should we do?" She asked, her tail tightly curled around Skytail's.

Skytail shrugged. "Why don't we ask Logstorm?" She suggested as she rose to her paws and stretched, her tail still twined with Sparkpaw's. Side by side, they headed down the slope and padded toward the Fallen Tree, where Redstar, Morningshine, and Logstorm were sharing two rabbits.

Redstar glanced up with blood speckling his muzzle. "Sparkpaw! Skytail!" He purred loudly as they padded up. Morningshine looked up and gazed questioningly at her daughter.

"Hi, Redstar," the apprentice replied sheepishly with an embarrassed look at Skytail before looking back to her parents. "Is there anything that needs to be done around the camp?" She asked, her voice bashful.

Redstar glanced over at Logstorm. "Is there?" He asked with a twitch of his pink nose.

Logstorm was quiet for a moment as he looked at Skytail, his orange eyes speculative. *He remembers what I said to him earlier,* she thought as she stiffened. "I suppose the elders need their pelts checked," he meowed thoughtfully. Skytail's ears flattened. "But," he went on briskly. "I'll have Marshpaw and Parsleypaw deal with them later."

Beside her, Sparkpaw sighed in relief and Skytail felt herself relax. "What is there to do?" Skytail asked, her paws itching to get something to do. "We can go on a patrol."

Logstorm nodded. "You can lead it, Skytail." He considered, surprising Skytail. "Take Sparkpaw, Twigpaw, Greenscar, Cinderlight, and Pigeonpaw."

Skytail nodded and, with Sparkpaw at her side, headed into the middle of the clearing. She turned to her friend, her eyes gentle but eager. *I'm leading my first patrol!* Excitement and anxiety pricked her paws as she gazed into Sparkpaw's delighted blue eyes. "Could you get Twigpaw and Pigeonpaw?" She asked. "I'll get Cinderlight and

Greenscar."

Sparkpaw nodded and rubbed her cheek against Skytail's lovingly. Skytail felt her pelt heat up at the action, but she purred. "Of course I will," she meowed happily. "I'll be right back." Spinning around, Sparkpaw trotted away with a spring in her step.

Feeling more confident, Skytail padded toward the warrior's den and poked her head inside. "Cinderlight! Greenscar!" She called inside. "You're going on a patrol, let's go!"

"Coming, Skytail!" Called the voice of Cinderlight.

Skytail ducked out of the warrior's den and saw Sparkpaw leading Twigpaw and Pigeonpaw into the clearing. She purred as she saw Sparkpaw's eyes gleaming and she silently thanked Logstorm for letting her come on the patrol. "Are you three ready?" She called as she started toward them.

Pigeonpaw nodded eagerly, while Twigpaw scuffed her paws. "Where will we be going?" He asked curiously. "The ThunderClan border? Or what about the SkyClan border?"

His question startled Skytail, but she flattened her fur as she replied with an amused look at Sparkpaw. "We'll be going to the SkyClan border," she meowed, before adding sternly. "If we encounter a patrol, do not provoke them. If they provoke us, I will be the one to decide what we will do." She looked at them all. "Understood?"

"Yes, Skytail." They mewed in unison and Skytail nodded approvingly.

"Taking charge of a patrol already?" Cinderlight's amused meow came from behind her and she turned her head to watch as the warrior padded up with Greenscar not far behind. "You'll be made deputy soon as well." She joked, to which Skytail purred in amusement and swatted her ears playfully.

Skytail shook her head and kinked her tail over her back. "Are we ready?" She asked. The cats nodded and she headed for the camp entrance, Sparkpaw padding at her side.

As they started in the direction of the SkyClan border, Sparkpaw spoke. "How long do you think before Fernpaw and Slatepaw are made apprentices?" She wondered.

Skytail thought for a moment before shrugging. "They were made apprentices before I joined the Clan. Maybe they'll be made into warriors by the end of the moon." They walked in silence after that, only speaking to answer the occasional question from Pigeonpaw or Twigpaw about her barn life.

Suddenly, Cinderlight let out a hiss. "Who's that?" Skytail looked back at the she-cat questioningly. Her eyes were narrowed into slits as she stalked past the patrol leader and peered down across the declining moor. When she came back, her claws were unsheathed. "It's a SkyClan patrol! They've crossed the border and are heading up here."

Skytail's fur bristled with anger at the thought of a hostile patrol purposely crossing the border. She went up to see for herself, Sparkpaw at her shoulder. Sure enough, she saw five cats gradually making their way up the steep slope. Her tail out flicked back and forth in a sweeping motion. *Pan out.* She crouched down, bunched her muscles, and sprang from the top of the hill.

"Stop right there!" Came Sparkpaw's snarl as they pounded down the slope, pelts spiked with outrage and hostility.

The SkyClan cats halted with a flick of a brown tabby tom's tail. "We've come with a message to Redstar." The brown tabby meowed, his voice calm as his Clanmates were surrounded by the WindClan patrol. "It's important."

"Fox-dung!" Spat Greenscar as he glared at the five cats. "I don't believe a single word of their nonsense." He glanced over at Skytail, his eyes narrowed. "Give the order, and we'll shred them."

"Wait," Skytail ventured as she took a step toward the brown tabby. He didn't look like he wanted a fight, but she didn't trust any SkyClan cat after what happened when her, Ravenstem, and Logstorm marked the border moons ago. "He might be telling the truth."

Cinderlight's tail lashed. "And he might not," she retorted as she glared at the SkyClan patrol. Skytail hesitated, not knowing what to do. Should she trust the brown tabby tom, or her Clanmates? *Which side knows best?*

One of the SkyClan cats, a gray tom with dark paws and yellow eyes, hissed from behind the brown tabby. "This is useless, Dewbriar. They don't believe you, let's just go." He turned as though to leave, but Greenscar blocked his path. "Get out of my way, WindClan mouse-dung." He snarled.

Greenscar's neck fur rose into harsh spikes. "You aren't going anywhere, Rocktooth." He growled and unsheathed his claws. "Do you think we'd let you trespass on our land without a fight?" He stepped closer to Rocktooth with a snarl. "You are sorely mistaken."

"What do we do?" Sparkpaw hissed in Skytail's ear. "I don't trust them. But what if they are telling the truth?" Her blue eyes flashed as she looked at the SkyClan patrol. "We should send them away."

Skytail nodded slightly and cleared her throat. "Take your warriors and leave, Dewbriar." She meowed, her voice strong and unwavering. "We'll let you go without a fight."

Dewbriar's eyes flashed for a moment before they narrowed. "We aren't leaving until we talk to Redstar," he growled. His warriors drew up into a battle line, and Skytail unsheathed her claws.

"Very well," she growled and prepared her muscles to spring at the SkyClan tom. "WindClan! Attack!" She launched herself at Dewbriar, knocking him to the ground as the SkyClan patrol was flooded by the WindClan cats.

Twigpaw and Pigeonpaw attacked a fluffy white she-cat while Sparkpaw helped Cinderlight with taking down a dark brown tom with lighter paws. Rocktooth grappled with Greenscar and they both snarled and spat at each other.

Claws raked her shoulder and Skytail let out a furious yowl. Spitting, she sank her teeth into Dewbriar's shoulder and clung onto his flank, throwing him to the ground. As he scrabbled to get up,

Skytail churned her hind paws into the tom's back and slashed at his ears and head.

"You're making a big mistake, young cat." Spat Dewbriar as he kicked out with his hind legs, knocking Skytail away. "I'll flay you alive!" He leapt at her, claws extended. Skytail dodged to the side, gashing his side with her claws before sinking her teeth into his tail and pulling him back. Yowling with pain and fury, Dewbriar whipped around and slashed her cheek.

Staggering, Skytail released his tail and looked around at the fighting cats. Sparkpaw was bleeding from a scratch above her eye and from a wound on her side. Twigpaw was unharmed, but Pigeonpaw was writhing beneath the fluffy she-cat. He bled heavily from a bite on his foreleg, but his eyes were bright and he fought like a lion.

Rage flooded through her and she faced Dewbriar, her teeth bared. Lunging forward, Dewbriar reared on his hind legs, swiping at her ears. Skytail ran into his chest, slashing wildly as she was blinded by the tom's dark fur.

Dewbriar let out a cry of pain as he sprang away from her, scrambling to his paws as blood poured from his chest from several wounds. His eyes burned into Skytail's, bright with anger and pain as he yowled. "SkyClan! Retreat!" Before booking it down the slope to the border. His Clanmates broke away from the WindClan cats and rushed after him.

"Good riddance," spat Greenscar as he released his grasp on Rocktooth. "And don't come back!" He yowled after them before turning to Skytail.

"Let's go back home," Sparkpaw mewed, limping up to Skytail.

Skytail felt a bolt of concern as she saw her limping and let her lean against her side. She gazed around at the rest of the patrol. Other than Sparkpaw and Pigeonpaw, no other cat had serious injuries.

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Skytail guided Sparkpaw into Softear's den and watched worriedly as Shadepaw helped Sparkpaw to a nest. Her heart thrummed in her chest as Sparkpaw winced in pain as Shadepaw started to treat her injuries. Turning away, Skytail padded out of the den with her tail dragging behind her. Despite the victory, she felt guilty as she remembered her hesitance. *I should've listened to Dewbriar.* She thought bitterly.

"Skytail!" Bluefeather's call made her tail bush out as the she-cat rushed toward her, her eyes wide. "What happened?"

"SkyClan," replied Skytail as she padded past the gray warrior. She didn't want to talk to Bluefeather, all she wanted to do was curl in a nest in the warrior's den and sleep.

"C'mon, Skytail," Bluefeather pressed, following the she-cat as she headed for the warrior's den. "What happened?"

Skytail rounded on the dark gray warrior, annoyed and tired. "A fight with SkyClan!" She snapped, her anger spiking her fur. Bluefeather stopped in her tracks, eyes wide. "Leave me alone, Bluefeather." With a lash of her tail, she spun around and stalked into the warrior's den.

Chapter 12

"Fernpelt! Slatefall! Fernpelt! Slatefall!" Cheered the Clan as the two new warriors licked Redstar's shoulder before facing their Clanmates with shimmering eyes.

Skytail sat with Bluefeather, Wispwren, Sparkpaw, and Myrtlepaw as the Clan welcomed the two new warriors. *They're full tunnelers now,* she thought happily as she watched the two littermates took in their Clanmates' cheers.

Their parents, Hawkpool and Wolfleaf, rushed forward ahead of their Clanmates and congratulated them. Their other kits, Sapkit and Sapling kit, hurried forward and ran around their new warrior brother and sister while their parents laughed on in amusement.

Skytail watched the family with a pang of longing, remembering her family dynamic. She lifted her gaze to the sky and watched as the fluffy white clouds rolled gently across the blue sky. Was Maple watching her? What about Cherry? Was her mother as deranged as Marshpaw and Juniperpaw said?

"Skytail?" Sparkpaw's warm voice brought her back to reality and she looked down at the tabby she-cat. Her heart ached with longing to have a family and kits of her own, to love and watch grow up. For a brief moment, she was back in the barn with Maple, Cherry, and her brothers. Marshpaw and Juniperpaw were wrestling with each other and her parents were chatting aimlessly about the day. Her heart expanded as she gazed fondly down at Sparkpaw, itching to one day watch small versions of her run around and play.

The longer Skytail gazed into Sparkpaw's bright blue eyes, the more the ache hurt in her chest and she felt her fur optimism deteriorate.

"Are you alright?" Sparkpaw asked, her voice concerned and worried as she touched her tail tip to Skytail's shoulder. Skytail blinked the images of a happy family out of her mind and looked at Sparkpaw. "What's the matter?"

Skytail twitched her ear and twined her tail with Sparkpaw's. "Nothing," she replied, but her belly tightened uneasily. She wanted kits, sure, but was she ready? Did she want kits bad enough to have some when she became a warrior only a few sunrises ago? She shook out her pelt, decided against thinking about it right now. "What do you want to do?"

Sparkpaw got to her feet and stretched, arching her back as she yawned. "Right now, I want to curl up and sleep for a moon." She sent a playful look over at Skytail. "But, there's work to be done."

"Truer words have never been spoken, Sparkpaw," rumbled the voice of Lakespots as she padded up, catching the apprentices' last words. She looked between her apprentice and Skytail. "Logstorm wants us to do some battle training for right now." She nodded to Sparkpaw but flicked her tail at Skytail. "You can tag along if you want, but this is mainly for the apprentices."

Sparkpaw's eyes lit up with excitement and she lashed her tail away from Skytail's, making the warrior wince. "Who all are going with us?" She asked eagerly.

"All the apprentices plus a pawful of warriors," Lakespots responded.

Skytail blinked. "Why are all the apprentices going?" She asked, confused.

"To give them all training at once." Lakespots sounded matter-of-fact, and Skytail twitched her tail in annoyance. She looked at Sparkpaw. "We'll be heading out in a little bit, you'd better get ready."

Sparkpaw nodded respectfully to her mentor as Lakespots turned and padded away. She looked over eagerly at Skytail, her eyes gleaming. "You'll be going, won't you?" She asked, her eyes brimming with hope.

Skytail glanced at her and shifted her paws. "I don't know," she meowed reluctantly. Her heart broke as she saw the hope dimming from Sparkpaw's blue eyes. She took a deep breath and went on.

"But, I will be watching you, just not practicing."

That made Sparkpaw prick up again, her eyes shimmering as she pressed her muzzle to Skytail's shoulder, purring softly. "Thank you," she whispered. Skytail could scarcely breathe as she took in Sparkpaw's calming, and sweet scent. "I-I want you there to see me practicing."

Skytail sat down, resting her chin on Sparkpaw's head. She rasped her tongue across her head contently as the apprentice let out a shaky purr. "I'll always be there for you, Sparkpaw." She murmured in her ear, making sure she heard. "Never forget it."

***

Nutfoot turned to the apprentices as they reached the Hunting Plains. "Remember," she mewed, "this is an important session for two of our apprentices." Her green eyes rested on Woolpaw and Fawnpaw and the two littermates shifted eagerly. "This will be Woolpaw and Fawnpaw's final assessment before they become warriors."

Sparkpaw leaned against Skytail's shoulder, whispering. "They'll be full tunnelers just like Fernpelt and Slatefall." Skytail nodded and watched intently as Nutfoot addressed the youngest apprentices.

"Twigpaw will be paired up with Briarpaw, Eaglepaw with Cloverpaw, Furzepaw with Parsleypaw, and Haypaw with Sparkpaw." Skytail pricked her ears at Sparkpaw's name and she glanced sideways at her friend.

Sparkpaw was looking determinedly at Haypaw as she tensed her muscles against Skytail's shoulders. "I'm going to beat her," she declared softly in Skytail's ear.

"Don't be too rough on her," Skytail warned with a lick on the cheek. "She hasn't had as much training as you have."

Sparkpaw flicked her ear in acknowledgment but said nothing as she waited impatiently as Nutfoot went on.

"Fernpelt will be paired up with you, Pigeonpaw. Slatefall with

Myrtlepaw, Mothfoot with Juniperpaw, and Wolfleaf with Marshpaw." The red-brown tunneler twitched her ear and looked at Skytail. "You will be observing the apprentices, to assess their battle skills and see how they're doing with their training."

While the apprentices paired up with their partners, Skytail padded off to the side and sat down, her focus pinpointed mainly on Sparkpaw. Her paws itched to pull Sparkpaw away from Haypaw. Though the younger apprentice wasn't too far in training, it froze Skytail's paws to the ground whenever Sparkpaw had to do something that might harm her.

"Go!" Barked Nutfoot from where she sat with Brackenmist and Wollyfire.

Sparkpaw hurled herself at Haypaw, who ducked and battered her side with her forepaws before being shoved to the ground and started wrestling with her opponent.

Skytail held her breath as Sparkpaw was slammed to the ground, Haypaw on top while swiping at her ears and muzzle. "Come on, you got this." She murmured under her breath as she got to her paws and paced back and forth, her tail flicking nervously.

Sparkpaw forced Haypaw off of her and sprang to her paws, leaping forward and knocking the dark apprentice off her feet. Skytail's chest tightened as she watched Sparkpaw dart to the side to avoid a blow before defending herself with a swat to a hind leg.

A flash of red-brown fur caught her eye and Skytail glanced over at where Woolpaw and Fawnpaw were grappling with each other. Fawnpaw threw her littermate to the ground and pummeled her belly with her hind paws.

A bolt of pride shot through Skytail as she watched Woolpaw kick Fawnpaw off and drive her back with a flurry of swipes at her face, muzzle, and ears. Fawnpaw reared and met her littermate blow for blow.

She turned her gaze to sweep the entirety of the training cats. She watched as her heart warmed seeing Marshpaw and Juniperpaw

back-to-back as they battered and swiped at Mothfoot and Wolfleaf as they advanced on them.

Turning her head, she caught sight of Sparkpaw shoving Haypaw to the ground with a paw placed firmly on her chest. Her flanks were heaving and her fur stuck up, but her eyes were bright with triumph as she looked over at Skytail.

Skytail thought her heart would burst with pride as Sparkpaw's eyes met hers and gleamed like stars. She nodded to her but said nothing as she continued to watch the other cats fighting.

Finally, after a few heartbeats, Nutfoot spoke again. "Stop!" She got to her paws as the fighting slowly ceased. Her eyes met Skytail's before they drifted across the clearing. "How did you all do?"

"I beat Haypaw!" Sparkpaw boasted as she puffed out her chest, getting off Haypaw with an excited bounce.

Nutfoot nodded curtly to the apprentice, but Skytail beamed happily at her with a purr. "Woolpaw? Fawnpaw?" She went on, looking to the senior apprentice. "How did you two do?"

Woolpaw and Fawnpaw puffed out their chests in response, but Mothfoot and Wolfleaf nodded in approval.

Nutfoot dipped her head. "Very well," she mewed, a purr rumbling in her throat. "I will speak with Redstar, and we will make you both warriors when we return." With a wisk of her tail, she spun around and headed for the camp, Brackenmist, and Wollyfire on her heels.

Skytail hurried to Sparkpaw, butting their heads together with a loud purr. "You did so well," she purred warmly. "I saw you pinning Haypaw."

Sparkpaw looked as if she got any more praise, she may burst. "I can't wait to be a warrior!" She exclaimed with a bounce of energy. Skytail purred. "I'll shred the SkyClan warriors' ears and chase the ThunderClan cats until their paws fell off!"

Though her declaration was reckless, Skytail had to admire her for her drive and determination. Pressing against Sparkpaw's side, she

lapped at her ear as they headed back to the camp.

***

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey," Redstar began at the top of the Fallen Tree. Woolpaw and Fawnpaw were beaming up at their leader, their eyes shining. "Gather beneath the Fallen Tree for a Clan meeting!"

Skytail padded alongside Sparkpaw as they took their places below the Fallen Tree. The warrior pressed against Sparkpaw, breathing in her scent before turning her attention back to her leader.

"As you all know, Nutfoot held a large battle training session with all of the apprentices," Redstar said, his voice laced with pride. "Woolpaw and Fawnpaw fought bravely and fought off Wolfleaf and Mothfoot." His eyes flickered to their mentors, Wolfleaf and Hawkpool, beamed with pride and anticipation. "Are your apprentices ready to get their warrior names?" He questioned the two cats.

Wolfleaf puffed out his chest and nodded. "They both fought well," he meowed with a glance at his mate. "We will be honored to have them serve with us as warriors."

Hawkpool nodded and murmured in agreement, but her eyes strayed to Sapkit and Saplingkit as they watched from the nursery with Driftbird.

Redstar nodded. "Woolpaw, Fawnpaw," he turned to the apprentices, who straightened under his yellow stare. "Do you promise to uphold the warrior code, and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your own life?"

Woolpaw held her head proudly. "I do," she meowed, her voice strong and confident. Fawnpaw echoed her, their voices harmonizing and ringing through the camp.

Redstar dipped his head. "I, Redstar, leader of WindClan call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these two apprentices. They have trained hard to learn and understand the ways of your noble

code, and I condemn them to you as warriors in their turn." He rested his yellow gaze on Woolpaw and Fawnpaw. "Woolpaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Woolcloud. StarClan honors your tunneling skills and we welcome you as a full warrior of WindClan." He leaped down from the Fallen Tree and landed with ease in front of Woolcloud. He rested his chin on Woolcloud's head and the she-cat licked his shoulder.

"Woolcloud! Woolcloud! Woolcloud!" Chanted the cats gathered around. Skytail watched as Redstar repeated the words to Fawnpaw and gave her the name Fawndust.

"Meeting dismissed," Redstar flicked his tail and the Clan dispersed into groups of excited chattering.

"Not a bad name," Skytail overheard Marshpaw mewing to Fawndust as he padded up. "Yours too." He added with a quick nod to Woolcloud.

Fawndust's pupils grew round and huge as she pressed against Marshpaw, purring loud enough to shake the entire camp. "It'll be your turn next, Marshpaw." She meowed as she pressed her cheek against his. "Your name will be better than any other cats'."

Skytail rolled her eyes and whispered into Sparkpaw's ear. "When will they be mates?" Her voice was sarcastic, and Sparkpaw shook her head with a sly look over at Skytail. "What?"

Sparkpaw said nothing before getting to her paws. "You're lucky you're cute," she meowed and Skytail felt her fur heat up. "Come on, I think Logstorm wants us to go on a patrol."

As Skytail followed the tabby apprentice, she couldn't help but think about her words. *You're lucky you're cute,* she felt confused. What had Sparkpaw meant? Shaking her head to clear it, Skytail flicked her tail and trotted after Sparkpaw.

***

The days went by in a blur as Skytail got closer and closer with Sparkpaw. The sunlight was shorter and the air got crisper as

leafbare crept up on the cats of WindClan. Skytail shivered whenever she had to leave the warm warrior's den to go hunting or on a patrol. She barely talked to Bluefeather since snapping at her and she felt a pang of guilt as well as annoyance as she recalled her friend sending wistful looks over at her.

She was laying in her nest as she curled around Sparkpaw, watching fondly as the apprentice shifted. Skytail knew she wasn't allowed in the warrior's den quite yet, but there was nothing the warriors would do if Skytail snuck into the apprentice's den and kept Sparkpaw warm.

Right, a small voice inside of her meowed. *You're just keeping her warm. Nothing else.* Skytail looked around at the large den, seeing Marshpaw curled up with Fawndust. She curled her lip at the sight of the new warrior and she shook her head, looking back down at Sparkpaw.

Sparkpaw shuddered and blinked open her weary blue eyes. "I-is it dawn?" She murmured sleepily, looking up at Skytail.

Skytail nodded as Sparkpaw yawned. "The dawn patrol just got back," she responded as she lapped at Sparkpaw's fur. While Sparkpaw woke up, Skytail groomed her fur as she talked about what cats left on patrol and which stayed.

Sparkpaw yawned and rested her head on Skytail's paws, gazing up at her with warm blue eyes. "You know," she meowed and Skytail cocked her head to the side. She shook her head, as though discarding what she was going to say. "Nevermind."

Skytail's ears pricked in curiosity. "What?" She asked, wanting to know what the she-cat was going to say.

Sparkpaw rolled over and bounced her paws, yawning for the third time. "I'll tell you when I'm a warrior," she teased and stretched. Skytail got to her paws and flicked her tail over Sparkpaw's ears.

"You can tell me," she pressed. Inwardly, she was amused at the she-cat's slyness, but it also hurt. *Does she think she can't trust me?* The thought hit her like a blow and she stiffened.

Sparkpaw glanced at her in confusion and touched her nose to Skytail's. "Don't worry," she meowed, her voice soft. "It's nothing bad, I promise." Her eyes flashed with fear for a heartbeat. It was gone so quickly, Skytail thought it wasn't there. "At least, I think it's not bad."

"You can tell me," Skytail repeated, sounding whiny to her ears. She stared pleadingly at Sparkpaw, who let out a heavy sigh and nodded. Skytail's heart lifted, but the apprentice held up her paw.

"Not here," Sparkpaw warned before spinning around and padding out of the apprentice's den. Skytail followed, her pads pricking with both worry and excitement.

"Where are we going?" Skytail asked, seeing Sparkpaw look around as she headed for the elder's den. *What is so important that she has to tell me, that she can't say in front of others?* She pushed the thought out of her head as she followed the apprentice to the side of the den. "What's the matter?" She stopped as Sparkpaw turned and faced her, her eyes unusually shy and nervous.

Sparkpaw hesitated for a moment before clearing her throat. "Uh, Sk-skytail?" She meowed, her voice crackling. Skytail blinked at her encouragingly, silently urging her to go on. "I- uh, I like you!" She blurted out. Her eyes briefly met Skytail's before flicking away, ears flattening to her head.

Skytail froze. The camp around them vanished as she stared dumbfounded at Sparkpaw. She blinked, and Sparkpaw was staring at her paws. Her heart nearly leaped out of her chest as she took a step forward and rested her chin on Sparkpaw's head. She let out a long, content sigh as she sat down, her tail curling around Sparkpaw's. "I-I like you too, Sparkpaw." She murmured in her ear.

Sparkpaw pressed herself into Skytail's chest as she nuzzled her face into her shoulder. Skytail closed her eyes, drinking in the apprentice's scent before she lapped at her ears. "Thank you," whispered Sparkpaw as she shifted, her eyes meeting Skytail's.

"Skytail?" Wispwren's voice startled the warrior and Sparkpaw leaped away from her, eyes wide and cheeks flushed. Skytail

suppressed an amused purr as she turned to her friend. "C-can I speak with you?"

Skytail nodded. "Of course," she replied before touching noses with Sparkpaw. She followed Wispwren away from Sparkpaw and twitched her tail curiously. Her paws fizzled with excitement as she recalled Sparkpaw's confession. *I like you, Skytail.* She felt her body fill with warmth as she looked over her shoulder and saw Sparkpaw chatting with Fernpelt and Slatefall. "What's wrong, Wispwren?"

Wispwren turned to her, her eyes glittering with worry. "Skytail, I-I'm expecting kits."

Skytail blinked, she wasn't expecting *that*. "Do you know who the father is?" She asked, stunned.

Wispwren lowered her head, her eyes sliding past Skytail. The she-cat followed her friend's gaze and was shocked when it fell on Fernpelt. "He-he doesn't know," the gray she-cat whispered shamefully.

Skytail was quiet for a long moment before finally speaking. "What will you do with the kits once they're born?" She asked, her voice a hushed whisper as though every cat could hear what they were saying.

"I-I don't know," her friend admitted as she stared down at her dainty paws. "But I know I can't keep them."

Skytail stared at her friend in astonishment. "What?" She meowed, shocked. "What do you mean you can't keep them?" Her voice rose to a squeak and she quickly lowered it. "They'll be your kin and the kits of Fernpelt. Surely you can keep them."

Wispwren slowly, and shamefully, shook her head while not meeting Skytail's eye. "I can't," she repeated, though her voice broke. "I don't know how to raise kits! How am I supposed to know what to do?" Her eyes started to grow more and more anxious and worried as she looked pleadingly up at Skytail. "Can you help me once they're born?" She asked.

Skytail's blood turned to ice at the undertone in her friend's voice. "What do you mean?" She asked suspiciously.

Wispwren's blue eyes darkened as she lowered her voice. "I-I want to leave them by the ThunderClan border when they're born." She responded, her voice a low murmur.

Skytail's eyes widened like twin moons. "You want to do *what*?" She yelped, her tail bushing out as her fur bristled. "I-I can't do that!"

Wispwren narrowed her eyes, but her fur was also bristling. But not with outrage and shock. The damp fear of a young cat who was about to make a big mistake. "Please," she begged, casting a glance over at the nursery where Driftbird was grooming her fur while her kits scampered about. "I don't want to be a queen stuck in the nursery with lumps of fur, fussing about when they'll get sick or hurt."

Skytail scrambled away from her friend, suddenly feeling as though she never saw her before. "I-I can't do that, Wispwren." She repeated, her voice shaking. "I'm sorry. Get Bluefeather to help you, or Greenscar. That's something I can't do for you."

***

Skytail padded alongside Finchsong as Redstar led the way to the Gathering Island. Her paws felt heavy as she looked to the side where Wispwren and Bluefeather were deep in conversation. She sighed as she curled her tail around Sparkpaw's side, letting it rest on her shoulders.

Suddenly, Redstar stopped as they approached a line of trees. He looked back and forth, his tail tip twitching. Then, he pressed on. Skytail flicked her ears as she followed. The familiar overwhelming scents of the cats from all different Clans filled her nostrils and she shuddered, her shoulder fur prickling.

SkyClan and ThunderClan are here before us, she noted as she scanned the large clearing. She spotted the copper-brown pelt of Copperstar and her fur bristled as she thought of his threat the day she became an official apprentice of WindClan.

"If I ever see your face again," he'd threatened when he and his warriors attacked the WindClan camp. *"I'll shred you to mouse dust."*

Skytail shivered, not from the biting cold, but from the leader's cold words. She wasn't afraid of Copperstar, far from that, just of what he could do if he had the power to do something to her and her Clan. She looked at Sparkpaw, who was staring in awe at all of the cats that ringed around the island. "Why don't you go meet some new cats?" She suggested, nosing Sparkpaw toward a group of ShadowClan and RiverClan cats who were chatting about prey and training. "I'll find you when the Gathering starts."

Sparkpaw hesitated as she took a wary step toward the group of cats, and looked back at Skytail. "Are-are you sure?" She mewed, her voice crackling with tension and fear.

Skytail nodded and blinked warmly at her. "Trust me," she licked Sparkpaw's cheek comfortingly before watching her join the other cats. Turning around, she spotted Bluefeather conversing with Moonpaw, Oakpaw, Cloudpaw, and Badgerpaw. Trotting over, she sat down next to Bluefeather, who tensed before relaxing.

Cloudpaw looked at her in surprise. "Skypaw!" She exclaimed. She looked bigger than when she'd seen her at the last Gathering, over four moons ago. She hadn't come to a Gathering in so long, but she didn't mind. "It's been forever!"

Skytail purred with amusement. "It has," she agreed. "My name isn't Skypaw, anymore, Cloudpaw. It's Skytail."

Cloudpaw's eyes glowed. "That's great news!" She looked at Oakpaw, Moonpaw, and Badgerpaw. "We got our warrior names too! I'm now Cloudwing, this is Moonwing, and Badgerleaf!"

Skytail purred. She looked the ShadowClan warrior up and down. "Have you been eating a lot of fresh-kill lately?" She asked, aware of how rude she sounded.

Bluefeather shoved her, eyes glittering. "Don't say that!" Her voice was scolding, but Cloudwing purred.

"It's alright, Bluefeather." She nodded to Skytail. "I haven't been eating all the frogs in the territory, but I am expecting kits." Cloudwing's blue eyes glowed as she spoke, and Moonwing looked uncomfortable.

Bluefeather spoke up from beside Skytail. "Are they yours?" She asked curiously.

Moonwing nodded, looking uncomfortable and awkward. "Yeah," he looked at Cloudwing, who was purring. "She's only a moon along, but she acts like she's been expecting for longer."

Badgerleaf shoved Moonwing from behind. "Show some respect, you frog-brain!" He scolded with an apologetic glance at Cloudwing. "If these kits are going to be as great as you say, Cloudwing, then she has a right to act like a fox in a fit."

"Cats from all Clans!" Yowled Squirrelstar as he perched on the branch beside Vixenstar. Skytail stiffened as she spotted the SkyClan leader, but held in her claws as she glared at the dark ginger tabby tom. "Let this moon's Gathering begin!"

Vixenstar pricked her ears and rose to her paws. "I will go first if there are no other objections." The other leaders shook their heads. "ShadowClan has four new warriors. Please welcome Cloudwing, Moonwing, Oakfire, and Badgerleaf!"

As the clearing erupted in cheers to welcome the new warriors, Skytail caught a glimpse of gray fur and she looked over, seeing the same gray tom from when the apprentices were attacked. Her shoulder fur began to bristle. Bluefeather touched her tail to Skytail's shoulder, her eyes flashing, and Skytail forced her fur to lie flat.

Copperstar got to his paws before Vixenstar had the chance to sit down. His blue eyes flashed as he gazed around at the cats. "ThunderClan has lost Softwhisker in a battle with WindClan," he announced with a sharp glare at Redstar, who stiffened. "She had just become a warrior when one of your cats killed her without mercy." He growled.

Redstar's eyes blazed as he opened his mouth to retort. "And the cat who was responsible for her death was punished," his voice was a growl as he shot daggers at the ThunderClan leader. "I assure you, that will never happen again."

Skytail gulped as she looked over at Greenscar, who was sitting with Slatefall. His back was rigid and his eyes were green slits of pure fury. She silently willed the tom to hold his tongue as she glanced back up at the tree.

Copperstar rounded on the WindClan leader, hissing. "You've been awfully hostile over the past few moons," he accused, and Redstar bristled. "How long will it take for your Clan to kill another of my cats?"

"It was your fault Softwhisker was killed!" Spat Breezeblaze from where he sat with Mothfoot and Wolflead. "Your cats attacked our apprentices!"

A snarl came from the ThunderClan cats and Skytail craned her neck to see who it was. "Softwhisker was defending her Clan!" It was a black-and-white warrior Skytail recognized as Bramblefire. The tom's fur was bristling with rage as he bared his teeth at Breezeblaze. "Your apprentices slaughtered her in cold blood!"

Cloudwing leaned over and hissed into Moonwing's ear, but Skytail could pick up the words. "WindClan are a bunch of bullies to SkyClan and ThunderClan."

Pelt bristling, Skytail glared over at the queen with a lash of her tail. "It's not our fault they keep insisting on a fight," she retorted hotly. Cloudwing twitched her ear as she met her blazing blue gaze. "They continuously push at our borders. Do you expect us to bow down at their paws and let them?"

Hissing and growling erupted from the WindClan cats at Skytail's declaration and Redstar lashed his tail for silence as he glared at Copperstar. His yellow eyes glittered with anger and he slid out his claws.

"Threaten my Clan again," he spat. "And I'll let my warriors tear

your Clan to shreds." Without letting Copperstar respond, he turned to the gathered cats. "WindClan! We're leaving." Redstar leaped down from the tree and was swarmed by his Clan as he led them away from the murmurs following them.

***

"That couldn't have gone worse," Bluefeather muttered as she and Skytail followed their Clanmates into the WindClan camp. Skytail had to agree, thinking back to Copperstar's hostility and she sighed. *If only I hadn't opened my jaws and made it worse,* she thought miserably as guilt pricked her pads.

"It'll be okay," Finchsong said, padding up as she heard Bluefeather's words. Skytail glanced at the white-and-gray tabby tunneler, her chest hollow with guilt. "I'm sure Redstar will handle Copperstar in a way to not throw us into a war."

Skytail couldn't agree. Glancing up at her leader, she saw him speaking to Logstorm, who was bristling with indignation and fury. *I wonder what they're talking about.* Quickening her stride, she pricked her ears and tried to not look like she was eavesdropping.

"We should attack them, not talk to them." Logstorm hissed. Anger lined each word and Skytail was mildly surprised at the deputy's insistence to leap into a battle. She'd thought Logstorm would be the last cat to want to fight ThunderClan.

"We need to think about what Copperstar said," countered Redstar as he twitched his tail tip, deep in thought. "Softwhisker was killed by one of our own, maybe we need to step back from being so hostile."

Logstorm grumbled in irritation. "Copperstar is the one who got Softwhisker killed," he pointed out, annoyed. "If they hadn't attacked us, their warrior wouldn't be dead."

Redstar flashed his yellow gaze at his deputy before clearing his throat. "While that may be true," he began with an edge to his voice. "We may have to consider both sides."

His deputy lashed his tail and growled. "If we do not fight now, then ThunderClan will think we can be insulted and threatened without doing anything."

Skytail heard no more as Sparkpaw bounded up to her side, her fur prickling along her spine. "What's the matter?" The warrior asked, turning her attention away from the leader and deputy.

Sparkpaw looked worried as she looked over her shoulder. Skytail followed her gaze and was concerned as it laid on Greenscar, Marshpaw, Juniperpaw, Fernpelt, Myrtlepaw, and many other apprentices. "They-they're talking about attacking ThunderClan in the night," she whispered, looking back to Skytail with huge blue eyes. "What if they do?"

Skytail shrugged. "They're probably just making threats to look tough." She licked Sparkpaw around the ears comfortingly. "Don't worry about it, they won't do anything." As she trekked into the hollow, she yawned. "I'm heading to my nest, want to come?" She looked at Sparkpaw, who shook her head.

"I'm going to see what Fernpelt thinks of the Gathering," she mewed and touched noses with Skytail. "I'll see you in a little bit." Sparkpaw turned away and wove between the returning cats to reach the dark brown tabby tunneler.

"Watch this, Darkfeather!" Skytail's ears pricked at the sound of Martenkit's voice and she turned, seeing the small kit pounce on a clump of fur from a rabbit. Skytail watched as the dark bracken-colored tabby tom wrestled with the fur before he shredded it with his thorn-sharp claws. "See? I killed it!"

Darkfeather was watching from the nursery, looking exhausted. Skytail blinked in concern as her former mentor got to her paws and padded toward her kit. "That's great, dear." She mewed, her voice thick with fatigue. "Come on, it's time to sleep."

Martenkit let out a chorus of protests as his mother scooped him up by his scruff and marched inside the nursery. The clump of rabbit fur lay where the kit shredded it and Skytail sighed, feeling anxiety prick her paws as she headed for the warrior's den. *Would Martenkit*

be so eager to shred an enemy like he did that rabbit fur? She wondered as she slipped inside the dark den.

Curling into her nest, she waited for a few heartbeats for Sparkpaw to join her but ended up giving way to the blackness of sleep that tugged at the corners of her eyes and she fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter 13

"From this moment on, you will be known as Marshfrost." Redstar declared, resting his chin on the new warrior's head. "StarClan honors your bravery and determination and we welcome you as a full warrior of WindClan."

Marshfrost bent his head down respectfully and gingerly licked Redstar's shoulder before stepping back. His head was high and his brown eyes gleamed with pride as his snow-white fur glistened in the weak leafbare sun.

Juniperpaw- no, Juniperblaze, since a few heartbeats ago- stood beside his brother, his chest puffed out in pride. Skytail glowed with pride for her brothers, astonished at how quickly they were accepted and trusted by the entire Clan.

Not only did Marshfrost have Fawndust mooning over him, but Slatefall was starting to warm up to Juniperblaze in the recent moons. Skytail was glad that even though all three of them were born outside of the Clans, they were accepted and cared for by their moorland Clanmates.

"Juniperblaze! Marshfrost! Juniperblaze! Marshfrost!" Skytail called. Sparkpaw, who was sitting next to her, took up the chant, and together, they got the whole Clan to cheer for the two new warriors.

Redstar dipped his head to the Clan and flicked his tail. "Meeting dismissed," he meowed and turned away, padding toward where Morningshine was waiting with Cloverpaw and Briarpaw.

Sparkpaw nudged Skytail's shoulder with her nose. "Maybe now Fawndust will become Marshfrost's mate," she joked and Skytail purred with amusement.

"Hey!" Skytail turned around to see Bluefeather trotting up to them. Sparkpaw's neck fur began to bristle as she approached and Skytail

twitched her ear.

"What's up?" She asked. Sparkpaw shot her a scorching look before stalking away to join her father, mother, and littermates as they talked by the leader's den. Skytail watched her go, her tail flicking in confusion.

"We need to talk," Bluefeather meowed, her voice serious as she fixed Skytail with her ominous blue stare. Skytail stiffened before nodding. Bluefeather turned around and led the way to the warrior's den and leaped over the gorse barrier that ringed around the camp. Skytail followed, hesitating to leap over the wall, but she cleared it in a single bound.

"What's so important to talk about that we can't talk in the camp?" Skytail asked sarcastically as Bluefeather stopped, turned, and faced her. She halted, her pelt bristling as she looked into Bluefeather's blazing eyes.

Bluefeather lashed her tail as her claws unsheathed, plucking the ground. "Are you out of your mind?" She demanded furiously, eyes narrowed into slits.

"That's a bit forward, don't you think?" Skytail snorted with a lash of her tail, her nose wrinkling.

"Not helping Wispwren with her kits?" The dark-furred she-cat snapped angrily. Skytail bristled with indignation and she bunched her muscles, preparing for whatever Bluefeather would do to her. "Are you crazy?"

"It's not like I don't *want* to help her," Skytail retorted hotly. "I don't know what to do with kits that aren't mine." Her tail lashed back and forth as Bluefeather snarled.

"And yet you mess around with Sparkpaw," sneered Bluefeather with a curl of her lip. Skytail blinked in surprise, but narrowed her eyes with a growl. "Don't think I haven't seen the two of you flaunt around like you own the camp."

Skytail scoffed. "You've *got* to be kidding, Bluefeather." She eyed her

friend with a flick of her ear. "*I'm* the one who goes around like *I* own the camp? Are you stupid, blind, or both?"

Bluefeather took a stride toward her and squared her shoulders. "What are you talking about?" She challenged. "You go around with an *apprentice* constantly at your side, nagging you on and on without stopping."

"And I let her," Skytail felt anger boil inside her belly, threatening to spill over. "Do you know why, Bluefeather?" She shoved her face close to the other warriors'. "Because I have no shame."

Bluefeather rolled her eyes with a wave of her tail, acting dismissive. "You're crazy," she growled under her breath.

Skytail caught the words and struggled beneath the wave of fury that washed over her, nearly knocking her off her paws. "You're a liar!" She spat back, her temper flaring. Bluefeather locked her gaze with Skytail's and her eyes glinted. She shook her head, trying her best to clear it.

Bluefeather lashed her tail, baring her teeth into the beginning of a loud snarl. "You disgust me," she growled, her voice dripping with ire.

"Is that supposed to hurt my feelings?" Skytail faked offense with a snicker. "Oh no, what shall I do?"

Bluefeather growled in anger and launched herself at Skytail, paws outstretched. Skytail dodged to the side, her tail lashing before her friend could sink her teeth into the flesh. "How does the Clan stand you?"

Skytail rolled her eyes. "Are you finished?" She mewed, exasperated. "I'm missing out on hunting with Sparkpaw." Padding toward Bluefeather, she shouldered past her and leaped back over the gorse barrier.

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Skytail stomped along the stream with Sparkpaw at her side. Her pelt burned with fury and guilt as she recalled Bluefeather's attempt

to attack her. Seething with rage, she barely heard Sparkpaw's words as they padded beside the water. *She's out of her mind,* she thought as she sank her claws into the ground as she walked. *Of course, I want to help Wispwren, but how could I help with her kits?*

Sparkpaw swatted her muzzle but she barely felt the blow. "Are you okay?" She asked, her voice sharp. Skytail blinked, glancing at her in confusion. Sparkpaw sighed heavily and flicked her ears. "I was talking about how RiverClan. I noticed Icestar looking frail and unkempt during the Gathering."

Skytail nodded, half-hearing the she-cat's words. She hadn't paid attention to the other Clans other than ThunderClan during the Gathering since Copperstar had started yapping. "Uh-huh," she meowed half-heartedly.

Sparkpaw gave her a hard shove, nearly toppling her into the water. "Alright," she hissed, irritated. Skytail turned her head to blink at the apprentice, shocked. "I give up. Are we going to work, or not?"

Her words felt like a blow and she stopped, staring at Sparkpaw in surprise. "W-what?" She felt her paws freeze to the ground as her heart stopped for a moment. "What do you mean? Of course we can work out!"

"Then why is your mind elsewhere?" Sparkpaw retorted, her eyes blazing with blue fire. "I can see it in your eyes: You aren't here with me, you're with Bluefeather in some other world that I don't fit in." She shook her head and Skytail felt her tail droop. Sparkpaw took a deep breath and continued. "I can see where I fit in your world, Sky." Skytail winced at the sound of her old loner's name. "If I am just a second thought, then..." She hesitated, and whatever she was going to say next was hard. "Then I can't be with you."

Skytail felt her mouth drop open and she stared in shock at Sparkpaw. Pain spiked her heart as she saw the sadness in sorrow that brimmed her eyes. "N-no," she whispered, sounding like a kit. She took a step toward Sparkpaw, but the apprentice took a pace away from her. "W-we can still be together."

Sparkpaw looked pained as she slowly shook her head. "If I am

nothing but a second thought to you, then I don't want to be in your mind at all." With a fleeting look at Skytail, Sparkpaw hurried away, heading for the direction of the camp.

"Sparkpaw!" Skytail called, feeling numb with shock and despair flood over her. "Come back, please!" Sparkpaw didn't turn around or slacken her pace as she left. Her heart felt heavy as she looked over at the water and saw her reflection. Her eyes looked like pools of misery and her fur was ruffled. Her anger from her fight with Bluefeather returned suddenly and she lashed out at the water with a paw of unsheathed claws, spraying water in the air and at her chest.

As the water dripped from her chest fur, a flash of fur and an ear-splitting shriek sliced through her fury and heartbreak and she looked up. Her heart stopped. In the water, rolling in the waves, was a silver tabby kit with dark stripes. Skytail sprang to her paws and ran up the bank, her eyes fixated on the kit. It looked about half a moon old, maybe a little younger as it flailed its small paws.

Pacing up the sandy shoreline, Skytail pondered what to do. *Do I jump in and risk drowning? Or do I wait until the kit comes closer to grab it?* She felt her paws itch to both grab the kit, and to stay on the side. Since toppling into the water moons ago, she didn't intend to get her paws or fur went a second time.

Taking a deep breath, she warily padded into the water and hissed sharply as the water lapped at her fur and tried pushing her downstream. Forcing her paws into motion, she waded toward the kit, who was stuck on a stone in the middle of the water. The tabby she-cat had managed to escape the water and climb on top of it, but her fur clung to her small frame and Skytail could see with a pang of alarm the small scratches and ribs that shone through her thin fur.

"Don't worry!" She called to the kit, getting a mouthful of water flooding into her mouth and making her splutter. "I-I'm coming!" Keeping her chin above the water, she made it to the rock and scrambled on it, panting hard with the kit shaking from the cold at her paws.

It looked helplessly up at her and mewled. Skytail felt her heart crack as she stared into its dazzling green eyes. For a moment, she felt lost in the kits' eyes until it mewled again and she was suddenly back on the stone in the middle of the rushing water. She leaned over and took the kit in her jaws by the scruff and glanced around. The bank seemed so far away now, far enough to where she couldn't reach it with a single leap. She'd have to swim back to the sandy shore.

"Hang on, little one," she meowed through the bundle of fur as she braced herself to plunge back into the water. Taking a deep breath, she forced herself into the water and at once the water was soaking her up to her neck. She unsheathed her claws and waddled to the shoreline. Her paws flailing, her pads stubbed against the pebbles and she was thrust out of the water and she fell onto the sand, panting with the kit between her teeth.

The little she-cat spluttered and coughed up several mouthfuls of water, Skytail doing the same as she fought for air. The kit mewled pitifully as she looked over at Skytail, her green eyes glazed as she wheezed and shivered on the sandy ground.

Skytail dragged the kit to her chest and lapped at her drenched pelt, trying her best to warm the kit and get her fur as dry as she could manage. Her strength ebbed from the swim to and from the stream, but she did her best to lick the kit. "Don't worry, little one," she murmured, her teeth chattering. "I'll get you someplace warm and safe."

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Skytail heaved herself and the kit through the gorse barrier that protected the hollow of WindClan's camp. Night was falling when the warrior returned from the stream, her limbs ached and the kit was cold to the bone. Forcing herself through the exhaustion that had tugged at her fur, she stumbled to Softear's den and ducked inside.

The medicine cat had her back to Skytail, doing some quick sorting before heading to her nest. When she heard dripping water against the cool ground. Softear turned, and her green eyes widened when

she stared at them. "Skytail? What happened?"

Skytail was going to speak, but the kit let out a shriek as it woke up from its cold sleep. She put the kit down, and it wobbled and shivered, as though it were being shaken by unseen paws. "I-I saw it on a stone in the stream by ThunderClan's territory." She panted. "I had to get it."

Softear sniffed the kit, and then the warrior. "I think you'll both be fine," she mewed, but her eyes were dark. "Take this kit to the nursery and wake Wispwren. She's the one who has all the milk since Driftbird's has dried up."

Skytail nodded and scooped the kit back up by her scruff. Slipping out of the medicine den, she headed for the nursery, her tail dragging behind her. She spotted a flash of dark fur as a cat slipped into the warrior's den, but assumed a cat was returning from the dirtplace. When she entered the nursery, no other cat was awake, other than a twitching Martenkit from his nest with Darkfeather and his littermates. She padded toward Wispwren's nest, her throat tightening as she prodded the queen awake with a forepaw.

"Huh?" Wispwren murmured, her voice blurry with sleep as she opened her eyes, looking up at Skytail. Her eyes hardened as she realized who it was. "What do you want?"

Skytail forced herself not to wince at the mistrust in her tone as she put the kit on the ground at her paws. "I rescued this kit at the stream border with ThunderClan," she meowed. "Could you suckle her?"

Wispwren narrowed her eyes. "*Now* you want to help helpless kits?" She commented tartly, but eased the kit to the curve of her belly with a forepaw. "You'd better leave. I need my rest."

Skytail nodded stiffly and turned around swiftly before heading out of the den. As she padded towards the warrior's den, she slipped inside and saw with a pang of sadness that Sparkpaw was nowhere to be seen. Spinning on her heels, she hurried to the apprentice's den and rushed inside. Spotting Sparkpaw's sleeping form in a nest too big for one cat, her heart felt heavy as she padded over,

gingerly curling herself around the apprentice before closing her eyes.

Chapter 14

Featherkit leaped onto Sparkpaw's twitching tail tip, pinning it to the ground with her tiny forepaws. "I got it!" She squeaked, looking up at the apprentice with proud green eyes.

Sparkpaw purred and flicked her tail free from the kit's paws. "Indeed you did," she mewed warmly as she licked Featherkit on top of her head. Featherkit mewled in response. "Why don't you go get a ball of moss? We can have a good play session with that instead of my tail."

Featherkit's eyes shone as they widened like an owl's. She turned to Skytail, who was basking in the weak leafbare sunlight. "Can we play like we did a few days ago?" She begged, trotting up to the warrior with pleading green eyes. "Please?"

Skytail opened one eye and looked at the kit, amused. "Last time we did that, I nearly hit Jayfang in the head." She thought of the grumpy elder with a pang of affection. The days went by since Skytail had found Featherkit and the kit had won over nearly every cat in the Clan. The Clan spoiled and doted on her as though she were Clanborn. The longer she stared into her green eyes, the more her heart melted and she sighed. "Alright, go get a ball of moss."

Featherkit's eyes lit up with excitement and she let out a *mrrow* of excitement. "Yay!" Turning around, she bounded into the nursery.

"You're good with kits," Sparkpaw commented quietly as she padded over to sit next to Skytail. Her blue eyes were dark as she avoided Skytail's gaze. Skytail sat up, concern pricking her fur.

"What's the matter?" Asked the warrior, touching her forepaw to the apprentice's shoulder. "Is something wrong?" She hadn't forgotten their fight moments before she found Featherkit, and it stuck to her like a burr buried into her pelt that wouldn't go away.

Sparkpaw was quiet for a few heartbeats before she faced Skytail,

her eyes brimming with tears. "I-I want to be with you, Skytail." She whispered, her voice crackling with each word. "B-but," Skytail's heart lurched. "I want to be your mate, and have kits just like Featherkit." Her eyes flicked to the ground where she shifted her paws uneasily. "But we could never have kits."

"Because we're both she-cats," Skytail finished with a heavy sigh. She thought about having kits before, of course, but she'd always hesitated about giving birth to the kits. It seemed so outlandish and awkward, she didn't want to go through the agony of bearing kits. "There is a way to have kits when we're both she-cats, though." She mewed slowly, an idea popping into her mind.

Sparkpaw eyed her warily. "Let's not think about having kits until I'm a warrior," she meowed. Something about the tone in her voice warned Skytail not to argue or continue. She nodded, respecting her boundaries. "For now, I want to focus on becoming a warrior and helping you raise Featherkit."

As though her words had summoned her, Featherkit came charging out of the nursery, a ball of moss dangling from her teeth. "I got one!" She meowed, her voice muffled around the moss.

"Good job," purred Skytail as she nodded approvingly. When Featherkit dropped the moss, she hooked it with a claw and flung it across the clearing. Featherkit scampered after it with a squeak of delight. She watched the she-kit fondly, before glancing at Sparkpaw, who had grown quiet. "Look," she said, turning to face the apprentice. "We both know how we feel about each other, but warrior-apprentice relationships aren't acceptable by the Clan."

Sparkpaw nodded slowly. "I know that," she whispered. Featherkit came charging back and Sparkpaw threw the moss for her, watching sadly as she raced after it. "That's why I want to become a warrior as soon as possible," she faced Skytail, her blue eyes burning with determination. "So I can be a warrior with you, and be your mate." Her eyes gleamed, but she hesitated. "You...do want to be mates, right?"

Skytail nodded. "I'd be stupid not to," she joked and cleared her throat. "I'm sorry about the fight we had by the border." She

mewed, her voice soft with regret and guilt as she met Sparkpaw's eyes. "You don't deserve to be an afterthought."

Sparkpaw's eyes flashed with pain and she stepped forward, burying her face in Skytail's shoulder. Skytail was shocked at how much the apprentice had grown. She was taller than the warrior, despite being younger. "I'm sorry for lashing out at you like that," she murmured in her ear.

Skytail murmured an apology and pricked her ears as Featherkit ran back, the wad of moss dangling from her jaws. "Nice job, Featherkit," she purred, rubbing her head with a forepaw.

Featherkit beamed up at Skytail, her eyes gleaming with excitement. "I want to be the best warrior in WindClan!" She squeaked, dropping the moss at Skytail's paws. "I'll beat those ThunderClan cats to the Thunderpath!"

Sparkpaw snorted in amusement before pricking her ears. She stared across the hollow and mewed. "The hunting patrol is back," she commented.

Featherkit spun around on her heels, her green eyes wide with awe. "They are?" She mewed, looking up at Sparkpaw. "Can I get a rabbit?"

The apprentice looked down at the tiny kit, and her eyes glowed with soft affection. Skytail purred and touched Featherkit's shoulder with a paw. "You can't have prey quite yet," meowed Sparkpaw. "You're not yet weaned from Wispwren's milk."

Featherkit looked disappointed but didn't argue. Then, she brightened, turning to Skytail. "Can I have a badger ride?" She asked, her eyes huge and pleading. "Please?"

Skytail let out an exaggerated sigh and crouched down, letting the small cat scramble onto her back and sink her tiny claws into her shoulders. Rising to her full height, she padded into the clearing, passing Bluefeather, Brackenmist, and Finchsong on the way.

"Look at that, Whiskertail!" Robinfoot's mew met Skytail's ears and

she looked over at the elder's den. Sloestrike, Robinfoot, and Jayfang were grooming themselves just outside their den. "Skytail's brought us a snack!"

Purring, Skytail headed for the elders. "That's right, Robinfoot." She nodded, her tail curling in amusement over her back as Featherkit's eyes widened. "Elders love the taste of tender kit-meat, right Jayfang?"

The blind elder swiped his tongue over his jaws and flicked his tail. "Yep," he agreed. Tasting the air, he added. "Is that a fresh kit?"

"Your nose doesn't deceive you," Skytail purred and lumbered over to the elders. "Here you go."

Featherkit squealed as she scrambled back, her claws ripping at Skytail's pelt. "No!" She wailed, holding up her forepaws to defend herself. "Don't eat me!"

Sloestrike got to his paws, coughed, and grasped Featherkit in his jaws. Turning around, he dropped the kit at Jayfang's paws and flicked his tail. "Here, you have the first bite."

Featherkit let out a shriek and raced away, leaving the elders and Skytail chuckling in amusement. *She can really run,* she thought with a pang of pride. *She'll be a great moor runner.*

Turning to the elders, she dipped her head respectfully and padded away. Sparkpaw was waiting by the nursery for her to return as Skytail joined her. "I'm back," she purred as she touched noses with the apprentice. "What did I miss?"

Sparkpaw shrugged and jerked her muzzle to the nursery. "Driftbird is getting her kits ready for their ceremony," she mewed and shuddered. "Gravelkit and Muddykit are ecstatic, but Sandykit is being hesitant."

Skytail purred with amusement. "She's always been timid," she pointed out as she shifted into a laying positing. Sparkpaw did the same and suddenly, they were curled up together outside the nursery. Skytail rested her chin on Sparkpaw's shoulder and closed

her eyes contently. She let out a gentle sigh as Sparkpaw rested her head on Skytail's paws.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Fallen Tree for a Clan meeting!" Redstar's voice cut through the camp and Skytail lifted her head, looking up in disappointment at the leader.

From the nursery, Muddykit's shrill voice was ear-splitting as he exploded out of the den. "I can't wait!" He squeaked, bounding up to Skytail and Sparkpaw. "Will you be watching us becoming apprentices?"

Skytail looked at the dark-footed kit and nodded. "Of course, why wouldn't we?" She asked, her tail twitching in amusement.

Muddykit shrugged and looked over his shoulder as his mother bundled Sandykit and Gravelkit out of the den. "I wonder who my mentor will be," he chirped as he wove between Driftbird's legs.

His mother purred, but her eyes brimmed with worry and she avoided her kits' curious gaze. "I'm sure Redstar will pick out the perfect mentors for each of you." She touched her nose on the head of each kit and flicked her tail. "Come on; it's time."

Redstar's voice came from the Fallen Tree. "Gravelkit, Muddykit, and Sandykit, please come forward you three." His eyes gleamed with pride as the three kits bounded into the center of the hollow, their every move being watched by the entire Clan. "Gravelkit, from this moment on, until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Gravelpaw. The mentor I have chosen for you is Bluefeather. She is a loyal and hard-working moor runner and I know she will teach you everything you need to know about becoming one of the moor runners."

Bluefeather rose to her paws and wove out of the crowd to her new apprentice. Skytail watched her with jealousy burning in her chest as she touched noses with Gravelpaw and sat back down near the warrior's den.

Redstar went on. "Muddykit, until you have earned your warrior

name, you will be known as Muddypaw. The mentor I have chosen for you is Fernpelt. He is a strong and skilled tunneler and I know he will teach you all about the most dangerous part of living in WindClan."

Fernpelt stood up and strode proudly into the middle of the hollow, his green eyes gleaming with satisfaction as he touched noses with Muddypaw.

Okay, Skytail thought, her shoulders tense. *So I'll get Sandykit to mentor. That's fine, I didn't exactly want to mentor Muddypaw or Gravelpaw.*

Skytail held her breath as Redstar continued. "Sandykit, from this moment on, until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Sandypaw. The mentor I have chosen for you is Greenscar. He is a fierce fighter and talented hunter and I know he will teach you all he knows about being a moor runner."

Greenscar rose to his paws and padded toward his new apprentice, his expression smug. As he and Sandypaw touched noses, the Clan started to chant.

"Gravelpaw! Muddypaw! Sandypaw!"

Skytail didn't join in, despite Sparkpaw's confused look and she smoldered with anger as Redstar concluded the meeting and went into his den. *I was supposed to mentor one of them!* She shouted in her head, but she held her tongue, seething with rage.

Driftbird padded by Skytail, her eyes bright with joy and pride as she licked Sandypaw's head before calling Gravelpaw and Muddypaw to her and doing the same. "I'm so proud of you," she purred as she nuzzled each apprentice.

"Is our father proud of us too?" Gravelpaw asked, looking up at her mother with wide orange eyes.

Driftbird didn't get a chance to reply when the apprentices' father, Wollyfire, padded up with something unknown glinting in his orange eyes. Driftbird flattened her ears to her head and puffed out

her chest, sizing up to her former mate.

"I'm sure your father is plenty proud, Gravelpaw." He mewed, his eyes unreadable as he looked between the three new apprentices. His gaze met Driftbird's before flicking away. "Er, I'm sure you'll do your best."

"They'll be better than their father any day," Driftbird mewed tightly, a hint of a growl in her voice as she glared at Wollyfire. The tom looked uncomfortable as he shifted on his paws, his eyes averting away from hers. "No matter if their father is there for them or not."

Sparkpaw shifted beside Skytail and the warrior glanced at her, seeing her eyes darting between both tunnelers with burning curiosity deep within their blue depths. *She wonders what happened between them.*

The three new apprentices were looked between their parents, their eyes as wide as moons. Gravelpaw shifted her weight from paw to paw, her eyes drifting from her mother to father and back again.

Driftbird lowered her voice to a ferocious hiss that made Wollyfire take a pace back. "Stay away from me and my kits, Wollyfire." She narrowed her eyes at her former mate, who looked taken aback by her tone. "They don't have a father, no matter how proud of them you say you are." Turning to her kits, she meowed in a lighter tone. "Why don't you three go see your mentors? Wouldn't want to fall behind on your training on the first day!"

The three littermates, though skeptical, nodded reluctantly and padded off. Their parents watched them go before Driftbird shoved by Wollyfire and left him dumbfounded.

"What just happened?" He mewed, staring at Skytail and Sparkpaw.

Skytail narrowed her eyes distrustfully at the older tom and flicked her tail. "Driftbird just left you," she meowed matter-of-factly as she looked the warrior up and down. "And I have a feeling she isn't sorry."

Looking distraught and confused, Wollyfire spun on his heels and hurried after Driftbird, who was almost at the warrior's den but was stopped by the tunneling tom.

Sparkpaw scoffed and looked at Skytail, her eyes glittering. "He deserved it," she remarked, to which the warrior nodded in agreement. She had to feel a bit bad for Wollyfire, but he chose to be absent in his kits' lives, and Driftbird raised them well.

"Skytail! Sparkpaw!" Logstorm called from in front of the Fallen Tree. Both she-cats perked up at the sound of their names. "Come over here!"

Skytail pushed herself to her paws, Sparkpaw doing the same as she flicked her tail. Darkfeather, Finchsong, and Cloverpaw were waiting anxiously around the deputy. "Come on," she mewed, leading the way to the four cats. As they approached them, she twitched her ears. "What's up?"

"ThunderClan," replied Logstorm, his voice grim. "They've been seen by one of Finchsong's patrol that they've been stealing rabbits by the stream."

Skytail bristled with anger. "Even when Copperstar said that *we* were the ones being hostile!" She snorted in contempt, her claws sliding from their sheathes to dig into the ground.

Finchsong acknowledged her with a flick of her ears as she looked at Logstorm. "What do we do if we see them?" She questioned, her eyes serious.

Logstorm let the fur on his neck bristle into harsh spikes as he responded. "Attack them and take the prey they stole from us," he growled and looked around at the cats on the patrol. "If they fight back, give them a few scars to remember us by."

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"You heard Logstorm," Cloverpaw mewed as they padded through the moor. The black-and-white she-cat seemed nervous, almost reluctant as they drew closer and closer to the border. "Attack them

and take back the prey. Don't you think we should just chase them away?"

Sparkpaw piped up on the other side of Skytail, her voice a strong growl. "And let them get away with stealing our prey?" She scoffed with a lash of her tail. "Yeah, right! We'll be defending our territory while also getting a meal we didn't need to catch."

Finchsong flicked her tail across Sparkpaw's mouth from a mouse-length ahead. She looked over her shoulder and flashed a warning look at Sparkpaw and Cloverpaw. "No cat needs to get horribly hurt during this," she warned. "This will just be a border skirmish with some prey trickled in. Besides, the extra prey will be good this time of year."

Darkfeather's tail rose and she stopped, nearly making Cloverpaw slam into her rear. "Wait," she hissed, crouching down with her tail flicking back and forth. Skytail dropped into a crouch and moved beside her former mentor. Just down the rise was a group of ThunderClan warriors. Amongst them were Waspheart, Spiderthorn, Amberlight, and Sandwing. Skytail sank her claws into the ground at the sight of the prey dangling between their jaws.

"They've deliberately crossed the border and stolen prey," Finchsong growled as she stalked to Skytail's side. Her orange eyes were narrowed into slits and her white-and-gray tabby fur bristling. "Come on, I'll take the lead. Cloverpaw, Sparkpaw, you two flank the right while Darkfeather and I will take the left. Skytail," the warrior looked at her out of the corner of her eye. "You go head-on."

Skytail nodded and readied herself to launch herself down the rise and confront the trespassers. When each cat was in position, Finchsong let out a ferocious yowl and charged down the slope, Darkfeather on her heels. Skytail tore down the hill, heading straight for a startled Sandwing.

The ThunderClan warrior dropped the prey she was carrying and braced herself for Skytail's attack. The WindClan she-cat dodged a sloppy blow to the shoulder and reared, swiping at Sandwing's ears. Sandwing snarled and leaped at her, slamming into Skytail's chest

and knocking her onto her back, wheezing for air as she pummeled her belly.

Skytail coughed as Sandwing landed blow after painful blow on her belly, her claws slowly turning red with blood. Raising her hind paws, she kicked out and Sandwing yelped in surprise as she was thrown back. Scrambling to her paws, Skytail drove the senior warrior back with a few blows to her face and shoulder.

"I'll flay you alive!" Sandwing declared as she lunged for Skytail's throat, barely missing as Skytail raked her side with her claws as she flew by. "I'll line my nest with your fur!"

"We'll see about that!" Skytail snarled and pounced on Sandwing, sending them both rolling over and over and over. Tufts of fur were ripped from Skytail's pelt as blood flew in the air, along with hissing and snarling. Pinning Sandwing to the ground, Skytail sank her teeth into her shoulder and hauled her to the left, before battering her hind legs with her claws as she snapped her jaws at her tail.

Sandwing yelped in pain, her eyes slit in anger and fury as she spun around and raced away across the border. Skytail roared after her and scanned the battle, where Cloverpaw and Sparkpaw were battering Waspheart's sides with their paws before snapping their jaws at his paws.

"ThunderClan! Retreat!" Spiderthorn yowled and the ThunderClan warriors fled, their pelts ruffled and blood trailing after them.

Skytail breathed heavily and sat down. She stared at her paws, which were stained with Sandwing's blood during the skirmish. Looking up at a sharp wail from Finchsong, her heart froze then sank.

Darkfeather was splayed on the ground, her eyes wide and jaws stretched in a soundless cry of pain as she stared sightlessly up at the cloudy sky. Skytail ran over and stood over her mentor's body, her eyes wide with shock.

"What happened?" She demanded, looking up at Finchsong, her tail quivering with grief and fury. Her voice crackled as she stared

down at Darkfeather, her paws working against the hard moorland.

"I-I don't know," Finchsong mewed quietly, looking from Darkfeather's body to Skytail. "I guess Amberlight dealt the blow when Spiderthorn ordered the retreat."

Cloverpaw limped up, her foreleg bleeding heavily. There was a scratch above her left eye, but it was clean and barely bleeding. "I-I didn't see Amberlight when the battle started." She mewed, her voice riddled with pain. "Sparkpaw was the first to attack Spiderthorn, and I was dragged in with the fight as well."

Skytail stiffened as she looked around at the two cats, her claws digging into the earth. "Where is Sparkpaw?" She asked, staring at Cloverpaw.

The apprentice flinched under her stare and she took a step back. "I-I thought she was right with me," she whispered, her eyes wide and brimmed with shock.

Finchsong touched her forepaw to Skytail's shoulder, her eyes gleaming with sadness and grief. "Perhaps she chased the ThunderClan warriors away," she suggested, but her voice was quivering with shock. "Let's get Darkfeather back to camp for her burial and vigil."

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"No!" Brackenmist was the first to notice the patrol returning with Darkfeather being carried on Finchsong's back. The dead warrior's mate crumpled to the ground, staring in horror and grief as his mate was laid onto the ground gently. "Darkfeather!"

"What's going on?" Chirped Mistykit, as she and Brindlekit bundled out of the nursery, Shellkit, Weaselkit, and Graykit on their heels. "What happened?"

"Yeah!" mewed Graykit, his lighter tail tip flicking as he stared up at his father. "Why is every cat sad?" His amber eyes flicking to his mother's body. Realization flooded over the young kit and he let out a pitiful wail. Racing forward, he dove into his mother's bloody

form, whimpering and shuddering as grief washed over him.

"Mama!" Shellkit's blue eyes were huge as his littermates surged toward their mother's lifeless body. "G-get up!" Skytail watched as the small mottled gray kit took a hesitant step toward Darkfeather's body, but he stopped. "Please..."

Skytail's heart twisted as Brackenmist pulled his kits away from their mother's body and huddled them against his chest, grieving with them. Skytail let out a heavy sigh, staring down at the dead body of her former mentor. *You were an amazing mentor, Darkfeather.* She thought solemnly, closing the she-cat's eyes with a gentle forepaw. *Rest well now.*

As the Clan gathered to stare at the patrol while Softear and Shadepaw emerged from their den, a flash of fur caught Skytail's eye and she turned her head to see Bluefeather watching from a distance. Skytail couldn't read her friend's emotions or her eyes from the distance across the hollow, but she could tell they were as distraught as the rest of the Clan.

Redstar's voice cut through the grief that hung heavily in the air. "Where is my daughter?" Skytail's blood ran cold in her veins as she realized Sparkpaw still hadn't returned. Redstar was staring around at the battered patrol, his eyes unreadable. "Where is Sparkpaw?"

Cloverpaw stared at her paws in shame, and Skytail pressed miserably against her. "We-we don't know where Sparkpaw is," the apprentice's voice shook and Redstar's eyes widened in shock. "We assumed she was chasing the ThunderClan warriors away."

"We have to find her," Mothfoot meowed as she stepped forward, her tail lashing. "Darkfeather is dead and we can't lose another Clanmate."

Logstorm brushed against Gorseflower, his brown fur rippling with anger. "I'll send out search parties right away," he told Redstar. "If ThunderClan thinks they can take two cats away from us, they're dead wrong." As the deputy assigned cats to search for Sparkpaw, Skytail turned away from the crowd.

Her head was fogged as she stumbled blindly toward the warrior's den. Her paws felt light while her chest felt heavy with dread and grief. *ThunderClan can't kill Sparkpaw,* she thought as she fumbled into the den and staggered toward her nest. The wounds Sandwing had given her burned like fire but she barely felt them as she flopped ungracefully in her nest, staring aimlessly at the ground.

A shadow fell on her and she twitched her ear, scenting Bluefeather entering. "Hey," her friend's voice was dry with grief as she padded toward Skytail. The former barn cat barely looked up as Bluefeather sat down next to her. "Who killed her?" She asked, her voice soft with grief.

"Amberlight," Skytail responded, her voice bitter and cracking with distress as she stared at her claws as they worked into the ground. She raised her gaze to meet Bluefeather's and she realized the storm of emotions raging in her friend's blue eyes. "Will you be going to her vigil?" She asked quietly.

Bluefeather nodded and she looked down at Skytail's paws. "Will you?" She dragged her tail around her paws and she flexed her muscles. "She was your mentor."

Skytail also nodded, trying not to grit her teeth and shove her face into her paws. *Darkfeather is gone. Sparkpaw is gone.* Her head shot up and she looked at Bluefeather, scrambling to her paws. "I-I need to find Sparkpaw!" She blurted, her eyes wide as a wave of something washed over her.

Bluefeather's eyes widened and she stared at Skytail in shock. "You just got back," she protested. "Besides, you need to get your wounds checked by Softear and Shadepaw. You're not fit to go searching for her."

Skytail flattened her tufted ears to her head and she glared at Bluefeather. "I'm going to find her," she hissed, digging her claws into the earth. "I *have* to find her."

Bluefeather's eyes suddenly turned to chips of ice. "Why do you "have" to?" She asked, her voice growing dangerous. Skytail

stiffened. "What is she to you? She's just an apprentice, and the others will find her." She took a step toward Skytail.

Skytail narrowed her eyes. "She's my friend," she mewed, her voice tight and terse. Bluefeather's body went rigid at her icy reply. She fought down annoyance as the den walls seemed to close in on them. Her chest tightened and her breathing quickened, making her start to panic more than she was before. "I need to get out of here and bring her home." She meowed firmly before racing out of the den, leaving Bluefeather alone inside.

"Skytail!" Softear's call halted the young warrior in her tracks as she saw the medicine cat weaving her way towards her through the gathered cats. "Come here, I need to see your wounds."

Skytail shook her head, holding up a paw to stop the curled-ear she-cat. "I don't need to be treated," she meowed, paws itching to get out and find Sparkpaw. "I'm going out of camp."

Softear's green eyes searched hers for a heartbeat before sighing. "You're going after Sparkpaw, aren't you?" She shook her head and blinked at Skytail. "I wish you luck, but be prepared if you can't find her."

Determination and fear settled in her belly as she nodded, a wary jerk of her head. Softear sighed and turned away, joining Shadepaw as they started moving the patrol cats into their den. *I'm coming, Sparkpaw. I'm coming to find you.* She thought as she burst from the camp entrance, her claws glinting in the sunlight.

Chapter 15

Skytail bounded down the slope as the sun began to set across the pale moorland grass. Her paws slammed into the ground as she pelted down to where they'd confronted the ThunderClan patrol. *I'm coming to find you, Sparkpaw.* She thought as she skidded to a halt, sniffing around as she tried to desperately catch Sparkpaw's scent. She could smell the blood of the battle from earlier in the day, and she tried not to wail aloud.

She caught the faint scent of Sparkpaw and she felt her paws surge with energy despite the run. Skytail looked up to where the breeze was pushing her fur, sending it bristling the wrong way. She tasted the air again. Though the scent of Sparkpaw was faint, it strengthened as she followed it to the ThunderClan border.

"Are you sure you scented her over here?" She froze as a squeaky voice met her ears. She turned around, her eyes wide as she saw Featherkit's beautiful tabby pelt glowing against the darkening world.

"Of course I'm sure!" Mewed the voice of Martenkit. "I've been practicing my tracking skills with Brackenmist, and he says I'm the best tracker in the Clan!"

Skytail felt horror and irritation shoot through her so violently, it made a growl erupt from her throat. The voices suddenly stopped and she could smell the sour scent of fear mixed with blood. *The kits are injured,* she thought.

"Wh-who's there?" Whimpered the fear-filled voice of Featherkit. Skytail narrowed her eyes against the dark gloom and she crawled up the rise, seeing the two kits looking around, their eyes wide.

"Kits," she hissed, startling them both. Their heads whipped around and they looked guilty when they met Skytail's eyes. "Come here."

Featherkit was the first to race to her and start meowing about

wanting to help find Sparkpaw. "I *was* going to look alone," she shot Martenkit a scorching look. "But he insisted to tag along."

Martenkit puffed out his chest. "You can't track as well as I can, you needed my help anyway." He looked up at Skytail. "Have you found her?"

Skytail shook her head, looking down to the border with ThunderClan. "I've scented her leading down to the stream, but you both stole my attention." She gave them both a stern look. "What will the Clan think when they find out you've left the camp?"

Martenkit stared defiantly up at her, his blue eyes gleaming with indignation. "They won't find out!" He mewed confidently. "We left when Wispwren, Hawkpool, Cinderlight, and Gorseflower were busy searching the territory."

Skytail gave him a hard look, to which he wilted beneath. "And when they return," she meowed firmly. "They'll realize you both are gone and freak out." She shook her head, her patience thinning as each moment was wasted. "Go back to camp, now. No arguments."

Featherkit's head shot up, her green eyes sparkling with a plea. "Please don't send us away!" She begged, shifting closer to her denmate as they both started to beg.

"Please," Martenkit added, making his eyes huge as well. "We can help! I can help you track and Featherkit can help with making sure nothing sees us!"

Skytail shook her head and the kits looked crestfallen. "I can't take you," she meowed and flicked her tail. "Go back to the camp and tell Redstar I've gone to search for Sparkpaw."

Featherkit looked down at her paws, her tail tip twitching. "Do we *have* to?" She mewed, glancing at Martenkit out of the corner of her eye. "We can be of more use out here."

Skytail narrowed her eyes and looked at the two kits. "I said no and I meant it," she growled. Featherkit and Martenkit flinched at her tone and she forced her fur to lie flat. "Go back to camp and let the

warriors search for Sparkpaw." Without letting the two kits argue any further, Skytail spun around and ran toward the ThunderClan border. She'd wasted time scolding the kits and she had to find Sparkpaw as quickly as possible.

The closer she came to the border, the stronger the faint scent of Sparkpaw grew. Taking a deep breath as she neared the stream, Skytail forced herself to ran faster and she leaped, clearing the water with a single bound. Not stopping for a heartbeat, she raced through the trees, her heart pounding hard in her chest as she followed the scent of unfamiliar cats.

The trees loomed over her as the sun slowly dipped beneath their leaves and the air grew chill. Skytail skidded to a halt, her head whirling as she fought to stay strong and focus on the scent of Sparkpaw. But, as much as she tried, Sparkpaw's trail was lost in the scents of so many smells.

"Hey! Stay right there!" A sharp call made Skytail jump. Startled, she whirled around to see Flintheart, the ThunderClan deputy, stalking towards her. She unsheathed her claws, ready to defend herself, but Flintheart did not leap at her. Instead, he hissed. "You're here for the apprentice, aren't you?"

Skytail glared into Flintheart's amber eyes, surprised to see guilt in the ThunderClan deputy's gaze. "Do you have her?" She demanded.

Flintheart nodded and looked over his shoulder. "Come on out," he called into the ferns.

In a heartbeat, a familiar red tabby pelt was emerging from the greenery, and Skytail's heart stopped. *Sparkpaw!* She hurried forward, nearly knocking Sparkpaw off her paws as she sniffed her all over.

"Are you alright? Did they hurt you? How do you feel? Are you hungry? Thirsty?" Skytail mewed rapidly, pawing over Sparkpaw as though she'd been gone for seasons.

"Skytail!" Sparkpaw mewed, sounded exasperated as she looked at Flintheart, amusement in her blue eyes. "Great StarClan, I'm fine!"

Although she was amused at Skytail's antics, the undertone of affection and relief was like birdsong to Skytail's ears. "Flintheart made sure I was safe."

Skytail licked her cheek over and over until she thought Sparkpaw's fur would come clean off. "I am never letting you out of my sight in a battle again," she meowed, her eyes darting to meet Sparkpaw's. "I-In fact, I will make sure Logstorm doesn't let you leave the camp. You will be doing nothing but picking ticks, changing bedding, and staying safe."

Behind her, Flintheart chuckled. "Does she normally do this?" He asked, nodding as Skytail pressed against Sparkpaw.

The apprentice shook her head and pressed her cheek against Skytail's. "I promise," she breathed shakily. "I'm fine. Flintheart made sure no ThunderClan cat laid a claw on a hair of my pelt the entire time I was held in their camp." She flashed a grateful look at the ThunderClan deputy, who looked awkward and bashful.

"I-It was nothing," he mewed. "You're just an apprentice, and I didn't want any harm to come to you." Flintheart looked at Skytail, and something about the glint in his eyes told her a different story. *He knows the worry of losing a cat he loves,* Skytail thought as she breathed in Sparkpaw's familiar, comforting scent.

"Well, well, well," snarled a painfully familiar voice and Skytail whirled around, coming nose-to-nose with the leader of ThunderClan himself. "Look at what we have here. A lovesick kittypet, a prisoner, and a traitor."

"Copperstar," Skytail growled, unsheathing her claws as she glared at the tom. She herded Sparkpaw toward Flintheart, who looked shocked as his leader snaked towards them. "You have the audacity to steal an apprentice from another Clan, and hold her captive? Sounds pretty cowardly."

Copperstar shifted his narrowed blue eyes on his deputy, who stood protectively in front of Sparkpaw. "You brought her here?" He spat, and Flintheart flinched, but his eyes were defiant and glittering. "And to think I had faith in you to be a good leader when I died and

joined StarClan. Instead, you're just a soft-hearted kittypet."

Flintheart bared his teeth at the leader of ThunderClan, his tail lashing back and forth. "You're not a good leader, Copperstar." He retorted. "You're just a sick, twisted, and mousebrained of a cat with nine lives."

The copper-furred tom hissed in response and glared at his deputy for a hate-filled heartbeat before swinging his broad head over to glare at Skytail. "I promised that if I saw your mangy face again," he mewed, all the hate in the world melting into every word. "That I'd rip your pelt off." His claws unsheathed and Skytail braced herself for what she knew he'd do. "Time to make good on my promise!" With a yowl of fury, he flung himself at Skytail, paws outstretched.

Skytail dove underneath him and watched as he slammed onto the ground before whirling around and raking her shoulder with his claws. She screeched, and Copperstar flew at her. Claws scored across her face, driving her back as she struggled to keep her footing. "Get out of here!" She shouted, seeing Flintheart struggling to keep Sparkpaw out of the fight. "Take her to WindClan!"

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," snarled the venomous voice of Waspheart as he slid from the bushes and blocked Flintheart and Sparkpaw's path to the border. "One more step, and I'll shred your pelt."

Skytail howled in pain as Copperstar rained a blow on her head, knocking her to the ground, dazed. He pinned her down, his paws on her shoulders while he churned his hind paws into her back, driving his claws deep into her flesh. Sick with agony, Skytail writhed on the ground, panic closing her throat as she saw Flintheart locking into battle with Waspheart. Sparkpaw's eyes locked with Skytail's for a moment and Skytail thought she saw something flash in her eyes before she leaped into battle alongside Flintheart.

Copperstar leaned down and hissed into Skytail's ear, his tone thick with menace. "Do you think you're safe in your own Clan?" He growled. "I'll have your pelt one day, Skytail. But, we have plans. Otherwise, rest assured, I will have torn you to shreds." Suddenly,

his hind claws sheathed and he let Skytail scramble away. "Run along, little bird, we'll be waiting when we're waiting."

Disturbed by his words and the malicious intent she caught onto, Skytail hurried over to where Flintheart and Sparkpaw had cornered Waspheart against a tree. "Leave him," she ordered and felt her wounds from her fight with Copperstar start to burn and ache. "We need to leave." Sending a final look over her shoulder at Copperstar, they fled to the WindClan border.

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"They're back!"

"Sparkpaw! Skytail!"

"Who's with them? I smell ThunderClan!"

Skytail limped into the camp with Sparkpaw and Flintheart on either side, supporting her as they entered the hollow. "Redstar!" She called hoarsely, still perturbed from Copperstar's words.

"Sparkpaw! Skytail!" Redstar came bounding from the Fallen Tree, his eyes wide with relief as he saw them. Then, his eyes flicked to Flintheart and she skidded to a halt, eyes narrowing. "What is he doing in our camp?"

"Father," Sparkpaw stepped forward. "Copperstar stole me and held me captive in ThunderClan's camp. Flintheart helped me escape and made sure I was safe. He's the reason I'm here." Her voice was strong, but Skytail could see her legs trembling and she stumbled forward, pressing firmly against her side.

Redstar's eyes slid to Flintheart, still gleaming with mistrust. "Is that true?" He questioned. "Did you help free my daughter from your hare-brained leader?"

Flintheart stood in front of Redstar and bowed his head, his tail tucking between his legs submissively. "It is," he mewed. "I didn't let a single ThunderClan cat lay a claw on your daughter, and I made sure she got out as soon as possible."

"She should have never been taken in the first place," snarled Morningshine, padding up to stand beside her mate. "Why did Copperstar steal her? To get our secrets out of her?"

Flintheart shook his head, and Skytail admired his ability not to wilt underneath Morningshine's intense glare. "He wanted to coax you into a war that should never be fought," he meowed, then lifted his head. "If you saw how horrible my Clanmates are being treated, you'd understand why I turned my back on them to save your kit."

"And what about you?" Redstar meowed, his voice tight. "Are you here to spy for your leader? If so, I will personally rip your pelt off and line my nest with it."

The ThunderClan deputy shook his head, eyes flashing. "I have no intention on doing anything to harm you or your Clan, Redstar." He responded calmly. "In fact, I am stepping down as ThunderClan's deputy." He sized up the WindClan leader. "And I request to join your Clan as a warrior."

Gasps of shock and outrage filled the air, Skytail among them. *He's got to have bees in his brain if he thinks Redstar will accept him!* She thought, watching intensely.

Redstar swallowed and considered the tom's words. "You'll have to train for whatever role you are given," he mewed slowly. "Things are different here in WindClan than it is in ThunderClan."

Flintheart nodded. "I will do anything I can to help," he meowed.

"Very well," the Clan leader raised his voice. "This cat will be accepted into the Clan, but not as an apprentice. He will be a tunneler, and will get information about how a tunneler acts and performs his duties by the other tunnelers." He turned his yellow gaze on the Clan. "If any cat refuses, they can leave the Clan entirely."

Skytail cleared her throat. "Flintheart!" She called.

Sparkpaw joined in. "Flintheart!"

The rest of the Clan begrudgingly joined in the call, and when it

died down, they dispersed. Skytail staggered up to Redstar, Sparkpaw at her side.

"Redstar," she hissed urgently. The leader turned and dipped his head to her.

"Skytail," his voice was respectful. "I thank you personally for getting my daughter back. You are a noble warrior, and WindClan honors your bravery." Redstar looked at his daughter. "In the morning, you will be made into a warrior, alongside your littermates and Lakespots' kits."

Sparkpaw's mouth dropped open in astonishment. "B-But I haven't passed my assessment!" She protested, sounding as shocked as Skytail.

Redstar flicked his ears in acknowledgment. "No," he agreed. "But you've trained long enough and have proved worthy of becoming a warrior." He touched his tail to her shoulder. "You've earned it."

"Redstar," Skytail interrupted before Sparkpaw could say anything. The Clan leader glanced at her, and she drew in a deep breath. "Copperstar said something that you need to hear."

The Clan leader hesitated for a heartbeat before nodding. "Morningshine," he mewed to his mate. "Take Flintheart to the warrior's den and make sure Sparkpaw gets treated by Softear. Skytail, come with me to my den."

Skytail followed the tom away from the others as they padded toward the Fallen Tree. Ducking beneath overhanging roots and vines, Redstar settled down in his nest and looked expectantly at Skytail.

"Well?" He prompted. "What's the matter?"

Skytail sat down in front of her leader and took a deep breath. "When I was in ThunderClan's territory searching for Sparkpaw," she began, and Redstar nodded slowly. "Copperstar confronted us before we were about to leave. He-he attacked me, and told me something that I don't think is very good."

"Spit it out, then," Redstar flicked his ears. "We're alone, and if he's threatening my Clan, there will be a whole world of pain lying in wait for him."

Taken aback by his words but trying to mask it, Skytail went on hurriedly. "He told me that there might be cats in WindClan that are traitors. He said that we aren't safe in our own Clan and that they have plans for us."

Her leader snorted. "He's got bees in his brain for sure," he meowed and twitched his tail tip. "Take no notice, Skytail. I know you've been with us for a long time, but Copperstar's been doing this for seasons since he became the leader of ThunderClan."

Skytail tipped her head to one side, curiosity sparking beneath her pelt. "What do you mean?" She asked, trying not to sound rude or challenging. "How was he before becoming leader?"

Redstar blinked at her for a moment. "He was hot-headed, brash, and quick to jump to fighting." He responded and shifted his paws uncomfortably. "When he was a warrior, Copperstar was level-headed, calm, kind, and a peace-keeper."

"What changed?"

Redstar swallowed and he looked rather disturbed by her probing. *Am I going too far?* Clearing his throat, he continued. "There was an accident many seasons ago when I was a warrior. Copperstar was the new deputy of ThunderClan after the previous one was killed in battle. He was cornered by a badger and I had gone hunting when I heard snarling. I saved him with the help of Morningshine and Robinfoot, but Copperstar was never the same again."

"It sounds like you knew him pretty well," Skytail mewed, watching as Redstar glanced up at her sharply.

"We talked at Gatherings," he meowed tightly. "That's all. We were never 'friends'." Redstar twitched his ear. "If that's all, you are dismissed."

Skytail held her tongue from saying anything more as she turned around and padded out of his den. She yawned and headed for the warrior's den, longing for her nest. As she settled in the den, curled in her nest, she rested her chin on her paws and sighed, closing her eyes and fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter 16

"By the powers of StarClan, I grant you your warrior names." Redstar announced from the top of the Fallen Tree, his gaze resting on the apprentices clustered eagerly beneath him. "Myrtlepaw, you will now be known as Myrtlestorm. Parsleypaw, you will now be known as Parsleyfrost. Pigeonpaw, you will now be known as Pigeonpool. Sparkpaw, you will now be known as Sparkheart. Cloverpaw, you will now be known as Cloversong. And Briarpaw, you will now be known as Briarfern. The Clan honors all six of you and we welcome you all as full warriors of WindClan."

The Clan started to chant the new names of the new warriors, and Skytail tried to keep Featherkit from scampering up to Sparkheart. Her chest swelled with pride as she made eye contact with the new warrior, and love filled her from ears to tail tip.

"Sparkheart!" She called, her voice full of warmth and care.

When the Clan divided into groups, Skytail released her grip on Featherkit and the small cat darted forward, squealing in delight. Sparkheart grinned at the kit and crouched down, snarling playfully before chasing her back to Skytail.

Sparkheart bumped heads with her and purred loudly. "I made it," she mewed in an amused tone as she nuzzled Skytail's cheek with her nose.

"Yeah," Skytail purred, licking Sparkheart's cheek. Suddenly, she felt a lump grow in her throat and nervousness pricked her pads. "A-are we...?" She trailed off, unable to form the words.

Sparkheart gazed down at her with warm blue eyes and nodded, purring loud enough to alert every rabbit on the moor. "Yes," she breathed and touched her cheek against Skytail's.

Skytail felt her paws fizzle with excitement as she pressed hard against Sparkheart, feeling a purr growing in her throat. "I love you

so-"

"Sparkheart," Bluefeather's mew cut Skytail off and they broke apart. Skytail caught her friend's eye and tensed, seeing something dark in their blue depths.

"Bluefeather," Sparkheart responded, her voice tight and Skytail pressed her side against her, eyeing Bluefeather warily. "What can I help you with?"

Bluefeather flashed a look at Skytail before clearing her throat. "Just wanted to congratulate you for becoming a warrior," she replied coolly. "And, Logstorm wants to speak with you."

Sparkheart nodded slightly and turned, locking her gaze with Skytail's. "I'll be right back," she promised and bounded away.

Once she was gone, Bluefeather twitched her ear. "Is she always that clingy?" She asked, looking at Skytail with a frown on her face.

"She's a good cat, Bluefeather." Skytail's voice was icy cold, and Bluefeather's body stiffened with shock. "You could learn a thing or two about being a good cat."

"I could say the same about you," hissed Bluefeather in return, her eyes flashing. "Not showing up to Darkfeather's vigil? Seems rather fishy."

Skytail's tail bushed out and her neck fur bristled. "I went to find Sparkheart, and I did." She growled, her claws unsheathing and digging into the ground. "I grieve for Darkfeather as much as any cat, she was my mentor."

Bluefeather shook her head and Skytail narrowed her eyes. "Breezeblaze didn't show up for her vigil either," she meowed in a low voice, her eyes darting around. "And you don't see him anywhere, do you?"

Cold unsettlement hardened in Skytail's belly as she realized Bluefeather was right. She hadn't seen Breezeblaze since they'd brought Darkfeather's body back to the camp. *Since I'd gone out searching for Sparkheart.* "He's probably just hunting." She mewed,

her voice dismissive, when she was trembling inside.

Bluefeather snorted and shook her head, her tail tip twitching back and forth. "Time will tell where my father went," she meowed ominously and she spun around and stalked away.

Skytail bristled as she watched Bluefeather padding away, her eyed narrowed. She forced her hackles down and took a deep breath. *Breezeblaze is around here somewhere,* she thought to herself. *He has to.*

***

Skytail padded alongside Wollyfire, Flintheart, and Myrtlestorm by the SkyClan border. They were marking the borderline with the prey they'd caught- two rabbits- buried further up the rise where they'd come. "How's every cat doing?" She called to Wollyfire, who was rubbing against a gorse bush.

"Almost done," Myrtlestorm responded as she marked a tree stump before padding up. "SkyClan's been rather quiet since ThunderClan's been more annoying." She meowed, her voice pondering. "I wonder what's gotten into them."

Wollyfire trotted up, yawning and stretching each leg. "Maybe they finally got the sheep's wool out of their heads," he snorted. Turning his head, he called over his shoulder. "Flintheart! Are you ready?"

"Guys!" Came Flintheart's shocked and horrified call and his stunned gray face came from the treeline, his amber eyes wide. "C-Come look at this." The shakiness in his voice made Skytail's blood turn to ice as she hurried forward, following Flintheart to the treeline. "I-I found him like this." The ex-ThunderClan deputy pointed with a claw to a russet tabby shape lying under a clump of ferns with leaves and dirt scraped on top of him.

Skytail felt sick at the sight of the tom, her stomach twisting into a knot that didn't cease. Her companions strode to her side and stared in horror at the lifeless cat in front of them.

Wollyfire was trembling as he stared at the corpse. "I-Is that...?" He

whispered, his eyes wide and brimming with grief and astonishment. He looked at Skytail, his tail quivering.

"Breezeblaze," Skytail whispered as she slowly approached the dead body of Bluefeather's father. Flies were already gathering around Breezeblaze's body. The blood roared in her ears as she moved the leaves off of the fallen warrior and gulped, scrambling back. "N-No..."

Breezeblaze's throat had been ripped out, and blood had pooled around his head, lapping at his fur. His paws were splayed out, claws still unsheathed as though he was trying to defend himself. Skytail noticed his eyes were open and wide, staring up at the sky in shock.

"H-How long has he been there?" Myrtlestorm whispered, looking at Flintheart with wide amber eyes.

"I-I'm not sure," replied the shaky voice of Flintheart. He was staring at Breezeblaze's body without blinking. His body was rigid with shock and horror as he forced himself to look away.

"We can't just leave him here," Wollyfire mewed, looking around at the rest of the patrol. "He died a warrior, he deserves to be buried with warriors."

"Wollyfire's right," Skytail straightened up, trying not to give in to the queasiness that clung onto her like claws. "Who wants to carry him?"

Flintheart raised his tail, his eyes unreadable. "I-I will," he meowed, his voice crackling. "I found him, I should be the one to take him back." He took a step toward and nosed underneath Breezeblaze's side and hauled him onto his rather broad shoulders. Staggering underneath the weight of the dead warrior, Flintheart padded from the trees and took a deep breath. "Let's get him home where he belongs."

Skytail sighed and stood side by side with Myrtlestorm, shielding the younger warrior from the sight of the dead moor runner. She curled her tail over the marbled tabby's back and watched sadly as

Wollyfire supported Flintheart's side. "Don't worry," she mewed in Myrtlestorm's ear. "Everything will be fine. We'll catch whoever did this to him. I promise." Her words rang in her ears and she couldn't help but think about Bluefeather, and she shuddered. *Could she have done this to her own father?* She pushed the thought away with a shake of her head.

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"Redstar!" Myrtlestorm called as they entered the camp. Skytail and Myrtlestorm had stood on either side of Wollyfire, Flintheart, and Breezeblaze. The entire walk back to the camp was a deep silence, and Skytail hated every heartbeat.

Skytail looked over at Flintheart as he gently laid Breezeblaze on the ground and rested his tail on his motionless flank. A harsh pang of sadness struck her heart and she sighed, bowing her head. *I didn't particularly like Breezeblaze,* she thought glumly. *But I wouldn't wish a death like this on any cat.*

"Skytail!" Sparkheart bounded up to the patrol, her eyes glittering with concern and shock as she cast a look over at Breezeblaze. "What happened?" She rubbed her cheek against Skytail's. "Are you okay?"

Skytail forced herself to look at her mate and she nodded. "I'm fine," she meowed, the lump growing in her throat with each word. "We just need to speak to Redstar."

"I'm all ears, Skytail." Redstar meowed as he examined Breezeblaze's body with a thorough sniff before raising his head and looking around at the patrol. "How did this happen to him?"

Flintheart was staring at Breezeblaze's body, and Skytail could see that he was trembling badly. His eyes were glazed and their attention was elsewhere as Wollyfire described the discovery.

"So," Redstar meowed, his voice tainted with fury. "You found him in SkyClan's territory like this?" He dug his claws into the earth and Skytail bowed her head and stared wordlessly at her paws while Myrtlestorm nodded sadly. "How far in their territory was he?"

"Just inside the treeline," Wollyfire responded, anger hardening in his mew as he scuffed his paws against the ground, his claws leaving deep gashes in the earth. "So much for them being quiet since the Gathering." He added in a growl.

Finchsong padded up with Hawkpool and Driftbird at her side. "This is clearly an invasion," she announced. "If SkyClan kills more of our warriors, what will they do next? Breezeblaze is only the first of many to die." She scanned the crowd that had formed around the patrol. "Who will die next? Will they come into our camp and drive us away? Or steal kits?"

"Finchsong's right," growled Bluefeather as she boldly raised her head, staring around at each cat in the eye, lingering the longest on Skytail. Skytail stiffened, and Sparkheart pressed against her, concerned. "My father is the first warrior to die because of SkyClan, what if one of you is next?"

Redstar raised his head and his voice. "It is settled," he turned, bounded toward his den, and leaped on top of the Fallen Tree. Those clustered around the patrol followed, their tails lashing and fur bristling. "SkyClan has taken the life of Breezeblaze for no reason. We will attack tomorrow at dawn."

Many yowls of agreement filled the air when Bluefeather opened her jaws again and spoke over the cries for blood.

"Why not now?" She demanded, looking up at Redstar with blazing blue eyes. "They're probably in their nests by now, we should attack and take them by surprise!"

Skytail shouldered her way to the center of the crowd and glared at Bluefeather, who returned her stare. "Are you mouse-brained?" She objected, her tail lashing as Sparkheart flashed her an astonished glance. "We could get elders and kits killed if we attack now! We should do what our leader says and wait until dawn."

Greenscar strode to Bluefeather's side and glared resentfully at Skytail, the scars on his face bright and pink. "Are you saying that the lives of other Clans are more important avenging the death of a Clanmate?" He challenged.

Skytail's fur began to bristle on her neck as murmurs of agreement made a buzz around her. Her fur felt hot with embarrassment, but she didn't back down or bow her head in shame. She took a pace forward and locked eyes with Bluefeather. "We should prepare our warriors for the fight at dawn," she insisted through gritted teeth. "If we go now, our cats will be too exhausted to defend our territory."

Bluefeather snorted in contempt and eyed her tauntingly. "Should we listen to the words of a kittypet?" She meowed, looking around at the audience and then at Redstar, who was watching on in silence. "Or listen to the words of those who grew up in a Clan?"

"How dare you say that!" Sparkheart snarled, leaping forward to stand by Skytail's side. She bared her teeth at Bluefeather, who looked smug. "She's not a kittypet!"

"How would you know?" Greenscar retorted. "You weren't born when she was brought into the Clan."

Sparkheart was about to speak when Redstar waved his tail, his eyes flashing as he heard each cats' words.

"That's enough," he mewed sharply. His yellow eyes were glinting and Skytail swallowed, shifting her paws as she tipped her head back to gaze up at her leader. "Skytail is right. We should prepare for the fight so we can give it our all tomorrow morning. Our cats need sleep and food. When we are ready, we will attack." He dipped his head. "Dismissed."

Skytail looked at Sparkheart, who had turned her back on the meeting and was padding toward the warrior's den. Skytail jogged up to her side and touched her nose to her cheek delicately. "Are you okay?" She asked, concerned.

Sparkheart twitched her ear at her question but didn't answer as she slipped into the warrior's den. "I'm turning in for the night," she announced and headed for their shared nest. She curled up in a tight ball and closed her eyes with a heavy sigh.

Skytail drew back her ears and followed, wrapping herself around Sparkheart and resting her chin on her shoulders. "What's the

matter, my love?" She murmured in her ear.

Sparkheart didn't respond right away, but when she did, Skytail stiffened. "Redstar might send you into battle tomorrow," she mewed, her voice laced with worry and pain. "I-I don't want you to get hurt." She twisted her head around and touched noses with Skytail, letting out a shaky breath. "Promise me you won't get hurt."

Skytail felt a lump grow in her throat once more. "Sparkheart," she began. "You know I can't promise that. I'll have to get hurt if I'm going to go fight for our Clan."

Sparkheart's blue eyes searched hers for a heartbeat before she let out a soft sigh. "I know that," she whispered and looked away, turning her head to stare at her white paws. "But, what if you come home like Breezeblaze? Your throat ripped out by some SkyClan warrior?"

Skytail blinked in surprise before licking her mate's fur comfortingly. "Don't worry; I'll come back alive." She promised and buried her face in Sparkheart's fur, breathing in her familiar scent. "And I'll come back to you and Featherkit."

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A paw jabbed Skytail in the ribs and she jerked her head up, eyes fluttering open. Sparkheart had gone, and the nest was cold without her fluffy fur. She blinked and looked up, seeing Rainstream looking down at her.

"It's dawn," the she-cat said with a flick of her ears. "The battling cats are about to leave. You're going with them." Rainstream turned around and padded out of the den without letting Skytail respond.

Sighing heavily, Skytail pushed herself to her paws and followed. It was raining in the hollow and the water seeped into her fur uncomfortably, soaking her to her bones. She shivered, wishing she had thick fur like her brothers.

Marshfrost and Juniperblaze were talking with their mates, Fawndust and Slatefall over two rabbits. Her heart warmed at the

sight of her kin purring loudly as they joked with their mates.

They used to be treated like outsiders, like me. She thought as she recalled the Clan's distrust of the two toms when they first joined the Clan. *Now, they're respected tunnelers.*

"Skytail," she turned, half-expecting to see Sparkheart, but instead coming nose-to-nose with Wispwren. Her friend's sides had bulged dramatically since first realizing she was carrying Fernpelt's kits. "I-I know you originally refused, but could you help me with the kits? I can feel them coming, I-I need you."

Skytail stared at her friend for a long moment, her thoughts clashing in her mind. *I can't do this,* she thought. *I have a battle to fight in!* Then, the other side of her mind retorted. *She's your friend, you mouse-heart! Help her! You wanted kits, right? You can raise them with Sparkheart.*

Wispwren sighed in disappointment and turned to leave. "Nevermind, forget I asked." She growled.

"Wait," Skytail meowed and blocked her with a paw, her heart racing. Wispwren turned to gaze at her, her eyes speculative. "I'll take them." She meowed before she could change her mind.

Wispwren's face lit up with hope. "Really?" She meowed, sounding relieved and astonished at the same time. When Skytail nodded, she sighed. "Thank you." She meowed in a hushed whisper. "I will bare these kits, but I know I'll be giving them to good paws." She winced and pain flashed in her eyes. "Th-they're coming."

"Let's get out of the camp," Skytail suggested and gazed around the cats who were about to leave. "Rainstream! I won't be joining you!" She called.

Rainstream's head snapped to her and she was silent before nodding stiffly before going back to talking with Logstorm.

"Come on," she mewed, standing at the queen's plump side. "Let's get you out of the camp."

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Wispwren let out a yowl of agony as her flank rippled, and Skytail had to fight back the urge to flinch away. "I-I can't do this!" She growled, sinking her claws into the ground and gritting her teeth.

"We've gotten this far," Skytail countered, her heart beating so fast, she thought the earth would tremble. "We can't go back."

The queen buckled underneath a spasm and she let out another cry of agony. Her body convulsed and there was a soft *thump* as a kit slithered onto the makeshift nest. Wispwren gasped and lay winded, panting hard as she tried to catch her breath.

Skytail pulled the kit towards her with a gentle paw and nipped the sack that encased it. When the kit was free, she lapped at its sodden fur, smelling the sweetest scent she'd ever smelled. Once the kit was shrieking and wriggling, she pushed it against its mother's belly and ran a paw along Wispwren's flank. "I can feel four more," she told the she-cat.

Wispwren groaned pitifully. "I just want this to be over already," she mumbled as she wrenched her head around to look at her newborn kit. Her eyes widened as she rested her eyes on the tiny kit. "It's a she-cat." She whispered.

Skytail nodded swiftly. Beneath her pad, Wispwren tensed and she let out a pained screech. In no time, there was a second kit lying beside its sister, wriggling and crying hungrily. Skytail made sure the kit was okay before letting it nurse. After what felt like a moon, there were five tiny bodies suckling at Wispwren's belly. She sat back on her haunches, staring in awe as the little kits kneaded their mother's belly as they nursed.

"Wow," she breathed, looking over at Wispwren with wide eyes. "What will you name them?"

Wispwren propped herself up and looked at the kits, her eyes glazed with pain and exhaustion. She touched her tail tip to the first-born kit, a dark gray-and-white she-cat. "Breezekit," she mewed. She touched her tail tip to the kit next to Breezekit, a light gray-and-

white she-cat. "Cherrykit."

Skytail nodded, and touched her tail tip to the dark brown tabby tom. "How about Shrewkit?" She suggested, looking to the queen for confirmation.

Wispwren nodded and touched her tail tip to a dark gray-and-brown tom with striped legs. "Darkkit," she murmured. Then, she looked at her final kit, a light brown tabby she-cat. "And Heatherkit for her."

Skytail nodded. "What will we do with them?" She asked, her voice low as though a cat were listening. "We need to get them back to the camp somehow."

Wispwren dragged her gaze from the kits and looked up at Skytail. "You take them," she croaked, her voice dry from lack of water. "Take them back to camp and I'll follow in after you."

Skytail sighed and nodded, her heart feeling like a stone in her chest as she bent over and scooped up little Shrewkit between her jaws. *Don't worry little ones,* she thought as the kits started to wriggle and let out squeaks. *Sparkheart and I will take care of you.*

***

Skytail pushed herself into the camp to find a mass of battle-torn cats breathing hard and looking defeated. With Shrewkit in her jaws and Breezekit and Cherrykit on her back, she stared in horror as she came up to them, Wispwren at her side.

"What's happened?" Wispwren muttered, Heatherkit and Darkkit in her jaws. "Did they win?"

Setting the kits she was carrying down at Wispwren's paws, Skytail bounded up to Rabbitspring, who was bleeding from a torn ear and slashed shoulder. "What happened?" She asked worriedly. "Did you win?"

"Does it look like we won?" The short-tailed tom growled with a scorching glare at Skytail. His voice was angry, and it raked

Skytail's ears. He heaved a long sigh and twitched his ears. "SkyClan's warriors killed Rainstream, Logstorm, and Mothfoot." He lowered his head in grief. "We barely made a dent in their camp, and they killed three warriors."

Skytail's head reeled as she stared at the short-tempered tom for a moment longer. Tearing her gaze away from the broken warrior, she scanned the cats who were fighting and saw Brackenmist tending to his kits by the nursery. *Where is Sparkheart?* Her heart raced in her chest as she searched desperately for her mate.

"Skytail!" A cry from the nursery made her snap her head around to see Featherkit and Sparkheart racing towards her. Relief clawed at her as she ran to meet them, burying her face in Sparkheart's chest and holding Featherkit close to her belly with her paw.

"Thank StarClan!" Sparkheart mewed, licking Skytail's head rapidly. "I thought you'd gone fighting." She pulled away from her mate and stared into Skytail's eyes. "Where were you? When I came back into the warrior's den, you were gone."

Skytail pulled away from her mate and adopted daughter and led the way to where Wispwren was cleaning the kits by the camp entrance. "Wispwren says she can't raise these kits," she mewed over her shoulder to Sparkheart. "She wants us to raise them instead." She expected Sparkheart to be thrilled at having a large family, but the tabby she-cat looked bewildered.

"Why didn't you tell me earlier?" Sparkheart meowed, her voice clouded with shock and anger. Skytail flinched as she went on. "Were you planning on telling me?"

Panic flashed through Skytail as she looked desperately at her mate, aware of Featherkit, who was asking Wispwren if the kits could play. "Of course I was going to tell you!" She mewed. "But I only made the decision when I woke up!"

Outrage bristled on every hair on Sparkheart's pelt, and Skytail shrank beneath her thin pelt. "Were you even fully awake when you said, 'Oh, yeah! Sure thing, Wispwren. I'll help you raise your five kits while my mate is off hunting prey and completely oblivious to

any of this.'" She glared at Skytail, who was frozen to the spot.

"Sparkheart, I-" Skytail tried to speak, but Sparkheart shook her head angrily and stormed away, her tail lashing. She let out a heavy sigh and her tail drooped onto the ground and she looked down at her paws.

Featherkit wove between Skytail's legs and looked up at her, eyes huge and confused. "Doesn't she like them?" She squeaked, her tail flicking to Wispwren's kits.

Skytail looked away from the kit and her shoulders slumped. "I don't know, Featherkit." She mewed honestly and looked over her shoulder at Wispwren. "Get them to the nursery and I'll talk to Sparkheart. Take Featherkit with you." Wispwren nodded and reached for Featherkit, who leaped away.

"No!" She protested, running in front of Skytail with her tail fluffed out. Featherkit stared pleadingly up at her, her green eyes wide in a silent plea. "Please let me come with you! Sparkheart is my mother, and so are you! I can help!"

Skytail thought her heart would melt at the tiny kit's words and for a moment, she was speechless. *Oh, you little thing,* she thought with a pang. *You're too young to know about any of that.* Sighing, she nodded. "Alright, but let me do the talking."

Featherkit beamed up at her mother and nodded vigorously. "Yes, Skytail." She mewed.

Bracing her shoulders, Skytail padded after Sparkheart, following the trail of scent her mate left.

Chapter 17

Sparkheart had gone through the dirtplace tunnel out of camp. Her scent trail was hot, and Skytail was smothered in her rage and betrayal. With Featherkit at her heels, she was padding through the gorse and emerged on the other side to see Sparkheart's red-and-white tabby pelt on the outer barrier. Silently taking Featherkit between her teeth, Skytail cleared the wall and set the kit down.

Sparkheart's back was facing them, but her shoulders were hunched and her head was bowed. Her nicked right ear was barely visible through the darkening light. Making sure they were alone, Skytail cleared her throat. At once, Sparkheart's head shot up and she whipped around, her eyes flashing before relaxing upon seeing Skytail and Featherkit. Although Skytail noticed, she didn't meet her eyes as she turned back around and hunched over once more.

"Sparkheart," she mewed, keeping her voice light and gentle as she slowly approached her mate. Sparkheart's left ear twitched at the sound of her voice, but she didn't turn around. "Sparkheart."

"Go away, Skytail," Sparkheart growled, her voice sounding bitter and high-pitched. Skytail stopped in her tracks, catching a note of sadness in her mew. "I want to be alone."

Listen to her, you idiot. Her mind scolded her as she started toward her again. *She calls the shots, not you.* Pushing her thoughts away, she sat down next to her mate, making sure not to touch her in case she flinched away. "Hey." Sparkheart didn't answer. She shifted closer. "Sparky?"

"Don't call me that," Sparkheart growled, glaring at her white paws. Her ears were flat against her head and her neck fur began to bristle into sharp spikes. "My name is Sparkheart. Not Sparky."

Skytail gulped and looked at her mate. "Featherkit is here," she meowed softly. Sparkheart's body stiffened and she winced quietly.

"You'll never guess what she said."

"Do I even want to know?" Sparkheart said sarcastically, shooting Skytail a glare that pierced her heart.

She shivered, but went on. "She told me that you were her mother, and so am I." Skytail watched as Sparkheart's blue eyes widened in shock and she lifted her head, turning it to gaze at Skytail.

"She-she did?" Sparkheart whispered, her eyes wide with surprise and warmth. At Skytail's nod, she called to the little kit, who tottered uneasily over. "Featherkit, is it true that you said we were your mothers?" She meowed, her tone unexpectedly soft and gentle like sheep's wool.

Featherkit looked at Skytail before answering in a small voice. "Y-yes," she mewed, before looking back up at Sparkheart, distress in her green eyes. "I-I hate seeing you guys fighting all the time. I know you love each other, b-but you could never have kits together." She looked down at her paws, deep in a frustrated thought.

Skytail suddenly felt awkward talking about having kits in front of a kit. She glanced at Sparkheart, who was staring encouragingly at Featherkit as though she was her next piece of fresh-kill.

Finally, Featherkit looked up at them again. "How did you have me?" She asked, her voice a high-pitched squeak.

"I rescued you from the stream that borders us and ThunderClan," Skytail explained. "I brought you to WindClan and you've been raised by us ever since." She leaned against Sparkheart's side, reveling at the thought of saying 'us'. *We really have become parents to Featherkit.*

Sparkheart looked over at Skytail and held her gaze for a brief moment before sighing. "Featherkit, could you give us a moment?" She asked, glancing at the kit.

Featherkit, seeming to get whatever message Sparkheart wasn't saying, nodded and skittered off through the gorse into the

dirtplace.

Once she was gone, Skytail turned to face Sparkheart. "Listen, I-"

Sparkheart cut her off with a raised paw. "I know what you're going to say," she meowed. "But I want to speak first." She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry for storming off and leaving you and Featherkit alone like that. And I'm sorry for getting so angry about those kits." Her eyes darkened and she looked away for a moment. "It's just, we're both so young and we're already practically raising Featherkit by ourselves."

Skytail nodded, understanding flashing through her. *I shoved so much onto her at once,* she thought guiltily. *She could barely comprehend it all before Wispwren and I brought the kits back.*

"I never thought I'd ever be able to raise a family," Sparkheart confessed. Skytail looked at her, confused. "I can't have kits, Skytail. Even if I was mates with a tom. I physically can't have kits of my own." She hung her head as grief crashed over her and Skytail pressed against her side, sturdying her. "I've wanted kits since I fell in love with you." Her voice crackled as she looked up at Skytail, her eyes watery with tears. Skytail gently brushed them away with a soft forepaw. "But I physically can't."

"It's okay," Skytail mewed comfortingly, licking Sparkheart's cheek softly. Her mate shifted closer to her, resting her chin sadly on her mate's shoulder. "We can raise Featherkit and Wispwren's kits, but we could have kits of our own."

Sparkheart scoffed quietly and shook her head. Skytail pressed her cheek against Sparkheart's chest, hearing her heart thumping in her chest. "How?"

Skytail was quiet for a heartbeat before she pulled away, looking Sparkheart in the eye. "I-If you can't have kits of your own," she meowed, her voice serious. "Then you don't have to be a queen in the nursery. I can have kits of my own."

Sparkheart stared at her in shock and pain. "Are-are you saying that you don't want to be mates anymore?" She whispered, her voice

breaking.

"Of course not!" Skytail reassured her quickly, touched her paw to her mate's, curling her paw around hers, and pulled her closer. "But there is another way to have kits other than raising those that aren't our own."

Sparkheart blinked her blue eyes at her as realization slowly sunk in. Her eyes sharpened and she pulled her paw away with a jerk. "Are you mad?" She spat, her pelt suddenly bristling and Skytail's eyes widened. "What if you get close to whoever-" She shook her head, scoffing. "Have you thought that through?"

Skytail nodded solemnly and saw how broken her mate looked. "I promise," she mewed lightly. "My heart belongs to you, and you alone." She searched Sparkheart's blue eyes desperately. "You want kits of our own, right? This is our only chance!"

"How can you be sure you can have kits?" Sparkheart mewed bitterly, looking away. "I just *know* that I can't have kits. It's a feeling I haven't been able to shake off my pelt since I was an apprentice." She heaved a sigh, her shoulders slouching.

"Just as you know you can't have kits," Skytail responded gently. "I have a feeling that I can. Besides," she mewed briskly. "We don't have to have kits of our own if you don't want to."

Sparkheart turned to look at her mate, her eyes chips of painful ice. "O-of course I want kits of my own," her eyes filled with tears and she choked out a silent sob. "But...I don't want you to go through the pain of bearing kits that won't share my blood."

Skytail bent her head and pushed her muzzle against Sparkheart's chin, forcing her mate's muzzle to raise as she snuggled into her chest fur. "I know a way that they can share both our blood, and the blood of a tom." She mumbled in Sparkheart's white chest fur. "Trust me."

***

"From this moment on, until you have earned your warrior names,"

meowed Redstar from the top of the Fallen Tree. "You will be known as Sappaw and Saplingpaw. Thrushleaf, you are a talented and skilled tunneler and you will mentor Saplingpaw. Teach him all you know about being a tunneler."

Thrushleaf rose to her paws and padded into the center of the hollow. She stood in front of her new apprentice, and touched noses with him and sat back down.

Redstar went on. "Skytail, you are a strong and swift moor runner, and I'm confident that you will teach Sappaw to be the best moor runner like Darkfeather has done to you." He dipped his head and looked expectantly at the she-cat.

Skytail nodded respectfully to her leader and strode forward, reaching Sappaw and halted, looking down at him. The young cat looked lean and strong, he would make a great moor runner. They touched noses with each other and broke apart as the Clan came alive with cheers.

"Twigflower! Eagleheart! Furzeshine! Hayfire!" They called out the new warriors first and then moved onto the new apprentices. "Saplingpaw! Sappaw!"

Four moons ago when Skytail and Sparkheart had talked, Featherkit had grown well into the role of being the older sister to Cherrykit, Breezekit, Darkkit, Heatherkit, and Shrewkit. So much so that Wispwren's kits looked up to their five-moon-old sister with such admiration and pride.

Skytail was proud of her mate and adopted kits so much that she thought her heart would burst whenever she saw them. However, Wispwren still saw her kits every now and then, but the kits had already attached themselves to Skytail and Sparkheart and saw them as their parents.

When the Clan was dismissed, Skytail looked over at her mate and saw her watching fondly as Featherkit taught them all about the Clan and how to leap onto a cats' tail when they weren't looking.

Sparkheart caught Skytail's eye and padded over, rubbing her cheek

against hers as they both watched as Darkkit pounced on Heatherkit and they tussled in a mass of fur and squeaks.

Skytail chuckled and leaned against her mate, relishing being able to be around her all the time when she wasn't out of the camp. While she yearned to be by her side every moment of every day, she knew that Sparkheart had her boundaries and she respected each of them.

Sappaw looked at the kits before looking up at his new mentor. "What will we do first?" He asked, his voice awkward as he flattened his ears to his head.

Sparkheart looked over at the tom and whispered in Skytail's ear. "He's so timid, a rabbit would send him running back to the nursery."

Skytail purred and playfully shoved her mate before glancing at Sappaw. "We'll start with a tour of the territory then practice the hunting crouch." She meowed and lifted her gaze away from her apprentice as Bluefeather approached. Her shoulders tensed and her body went rigid with tension as her friend came closer. She hadn't forgotten the implications she was dropping before Breezeblaze was found dead on SkyClan's territory.

"Brackenmist wants me to accompany you both with Gravelpaw as you tour the territory." The dark she-cat meowed matter-of-factly as she rested her icy gaze on Skytail.

Skytail felt her fur prickle with unease as she nodded. Looking at Sparkheart, she realized how hostile her mate's eyes were. They were chips of pure stone as she stared at Bluefeather, hostility gleaming in her eyes. Nudging her mate gently, she nodded to Bluefeather. "Alright."

"Good," Bluefeather's mew was brisk as she looked at Sappaw. "Meet us at the camp entrance." She ordered with a swift nod. The apprentice looked startled before he nodded quickly and scampered away.

Irritation flashed beneath Skytail's pelt as she witnessed her friend

ordering her apprentice around. Sparkheart had gone to join Featherkit with the other kits, and Skytail was glaring at Bluefeather.

When the gray she-cat looked over at her, she made a face. "What's with the face?" She meowed, her tone oblivious and irritated.

Skytail pushed herself to her paws and got in Bluefeather's face with a growl. "Sappaw is *my* apprentice, Bluefeather." She hissed threateningly as she glared into Bluefeather's blue eyes. "Do *not* order him around."

"Watch your tone, little bird," Bluefeather growled tauntingly as she lifted her chin, staring down her muzzle at the blue-pointed she-cat. Her expression was smug, and Skytail wanted to rip her fur off for it. "Now is not the time or place. There will be a more appropriate time." She swung her head around and padded after Sappaw, who was talking with Gravelpaw at the camp entrance.

Skytail watched her go and begrudgingly followed, her claws digging into the ground before propelling her forward with each furious step. *Her and Copperstar have it out for me, I just know it!* She thought as she met up with the two apprentices. *It's only a matter of time before something happens.*

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Sappaw bounded ahead of them, scrambling to a stop at the top of Outlook Hill. His eyes were wide and his tail was raised, twitching back and forth as he gaped at the scene ahead of him.

Skytail padded to his side and saw the ThunderClan forest. The oak trees looked dead without the leaves that would normally be lush and green. Instead, the brown oaks had nothing but snow weighing their branches down.

"Whoa," Sappaw breathed, staring across the moor to the far forest. "The territories are huge." He looked at his mentor, who was watching Bluefeather as she came up behind Sappaw. "Do they go on forever?"

Bluefeather snorted and shook her head. "If they did, we'd be fat and lazy come leafbare." She shot Skytail a glance and shrugged.

"Yeah," Gravelpaw sneered as hse came up beside her mentor, glaring at Sappaw with a taunting look in her orange eyes. "We'd be fatter than RiverClan and twice as slow, like ShadowClan!"

Skytail dug her claws into the earth as Sappaw looked shamefully at his paws. "It was just a question," she snapped at Gravelpaw, staring her down. "There's no need to be snarky about it."

Bluefeather flicked her tail. "Keep your fur on, Skytail." She meowed breezily. "Come on, Sappaw. We'll show you the ThunderClan border where Skytail and Wispwren fell in when they were apprentices."

Flexing her shoulders, Skytail stalked behind them, bringing up the rear, and Gravelpaw and Sappaw began chatting like starlings. Her ears flattened against her head as Bluefeather fell in beside her.

"What's got your tail in a twist, little bird?" The she-cat sneered, keeping her voice down to not alert the apprentices. "Are you embarrassed of your apprentice? He's a worthless lump of fur, and I wouldn't blame you."

Skytail rounded on her, teeth bared. "*Sappaw* will be a better apprentice than Gravelpaw will ever be!" She spat ungraciously. "Keep your nose out of my apprentice's business, and leave the both of us alone."

Bluefeather quickened her pace and stopped Skytail, standing threateningly in front of her. "Soon," she hissed. Skytail glared at her, resentment boiling in her blood. "I will make you eat your tail."

"I dare you to try, Bluefeather," Skytail growled, shoving her face in Bluefeather's.

"Tread lightly, little bird," the gray she-cat warned. "One day, your bold steps will get you killed." Swinging her head around, Bluefeather ran down the slope to catch up with the apprentices.

Chapter 18

Skytail watched as Sappaw crouched down, pressing his belly against the moorland grass. His paws were close together, and she could tell he wasn't comfortable. She shook her head. "Widen your stance," she suggested. "And make sure your belly isn't grazing the ground. You want to be able to move, right?"

Sappaw nodded and adjusted his position. "Yes, Skytail." He meowed and looked up at her. "How's this?"

Skytail nodded approvingly. "That's much better," she meowed and twitched her tail to a small rock a few tail-lengths away. "Try pouncing on that." She instructed, looking back to her apprentice.

A few days had gone by since Sappaw's naming ceremony and Skytail noticed a few things about her new apprentice. He was very nervous and didn't do much as a kit, for fear of being scolded or rebuked. Even though Skytail gently encouraged improvements, but even so, Sappaw wasn't very confident in himself or his skills.

What little skill he possesses, a little voice inside of her piped up. She forced it down with a swallow, watching as Sappaw stalked soundlessly toward the stone. They were alone on the moor, the chill wind ruffling their fur as they practiced in the early morning light. She could barely see her apprentice, but she could make out the silhouette of the tom. With the sun starting to rise and leafbare just starting, Skytail didn't have a heartbeat to waste to get Sappaw into hunting.

Cats had already started getting sick, and it made Skytail's heart sink whenever she saw one of her Clanmates being guided to Softear's den. Redstar had been the first to fall ill, and he was confined to his den. Softear and Shadepaw were also confined to the camp, although they were able to slip away to get more herbs, which were dying in the cold moorland. Hawkpool was sick, so was Fernpelt and Slatefall. They didn't go near Redstar's den, but the leader had talked to them one-on-one about something Skytail

didn't know. Or, didn't want to know.

"I caught it!" Sappaw reported, cutting Skytail out of her thoughts of sick cats and prey. Sure enough, he came trotting up with the stone in his jaws, his hazel eyes sparkling.

Skytail nodded approvingly. "Very good, Sappaw." She mewed and rose to her paws, stretching stiffly before shaking out her thin pelt. *The cold is starting to sink in,* she realized, looking around at the moor. "Let's head up here and see if there are any rabbits around." She blinked to the far slope that overlooked a small dip in the land.

"What if there are none?" Sappaw asked, following her at her side. His breath puffed in front of him, icy and heartless.

Skytail blinked in surprise before shrugging her shoulders. "I guess we'll have to find prey elsewhere," she conceded. Raising her head, she bunched her muscles and leaped from boulder to boulder until she reached the top, panting slightly.

Sappaw was breathing hard from the climb, and he sat ungracefully down. "Why do we have so many hills on our territory?" He complained, looking up at his mentor with wide hazel eyes.

Skytail flicked her tail under his chin, her eyes stern. "Do not complain about something that gives us prey," she warned. "In greenleaf it gives us more rabbits than we know what to do with."

"What about leafbare?" Sappaw asked, looking more interested as he looked up at her. He shifted closer, seeming eager. "How do we catch prey when they hide?"

"The tunnelers work best in leafbare," Skytail answered. "They go into the holes and tunnels and catch prey for us." Her tail whisked in a circle and she nodded to the hills. "Now, get up. We have hunting to do." Looking back at her apprentice, she decided to quiz his memory. "What do we do when we get within reach of a rabbit?" She questioned.

Sappaw responded almost instantly. "Funnel it toward a cat that's quicker than you," he mewed.

"And if the rabbit darts away?" Skytail prompted, proud of her apprentice's sharp mind.

"Run as quick as possible," her apprentice seemed lost in his memories of the lessons he'd been taught so far. "When you get close enough to its haunches, cuff its leg with a paw and make sure it falls. When it's down, kill it with a bite to the neck." He looked up at Skytail. "Right?"

Skytail purred. "Spot on." She commented and twitched her ear, looking around and spotting a brown shape not far from where they were resting. "Let's see if you can catch one."

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Skytail padded into the hollow with Sappaw in the lead, proudly carrying his brown rabbit between his jaws. He'd managed to snag and kill it when Skytail tripped it as it tried to escape her claws. She was proud of her apprentice, of course, but she could tell he was prouder.

"Nice catch, Sappaw!" Called Muddypaw, his yellow eyes fixed on the prey. He bounded over to his denmate, and the two set off to the fresh-kill pile.

Skytail chuckled and directed her paws to the nursery, wanting to see the kits before she was pulled away on a patrol. She hadn't gone far when a shrill squeak made her stop, and she turned her head to see Featherkit and the other kits charging toward her.

"Skytail!" Squealed Cherrykit, followed by Shrewkit and Darkkit. "You're back!"

Skytail's eyes widened as all six kits flung themselves at her. She staggered under their weight, gasping as claws sank into her fur and she gave an exaggerated grunt and flopped onto her side. Tiny paws pummeled her belly as the kits swarmed over her with excited squeaks.

"We got you!" Breezekit mewed, putting her small paws on Skytail's

cheek. "Now, you're dead!"

"Kits!" Sparkheart's call made every kit perk up. Toppling them off with a dark paw, Skytail got to her paws and chased them to Sparkheart. They let out squeals as they charged back into the nursery, kicking up dust in their wake. "Stay away from Cinderlight and the other kits!" She called sternly.

A little while ago, Cinderlight, Gorseflower, Fawndust, and Finchsong had moved into the nursery. Cinderlight had given birth to two toms, Volekit and Blizzardkit.

Gorseflower had given birth to four kits, two toms, and two she-cats: Oakkit, Echokit, Boulderkit, and Flowerkit.

Fawndust had given birth right after the apprentice ceremony to three kits, two she-cats and a tom: Mallowkit, Amberkit, and Nightkit.

A few hours ago, Finchsong had given birth to four kits, two toms, and two she-cats. Her kits were named Nettlekit, Strikekit, Dapplekit, and Tumblekit.

Along with Sparkheart and Skytail's adopted kits, there were eighteen kits in the nursery. While Sparkheart and Skytail didn't stay in the nursery, they would always make time for the kits.

"They'd better not disturb Cinderlight or the others," Sparkheart meowed, looking over her shoulder into the nursery. "I'll have their tails if they do."

Skytail purred in amusement and brushed against her mate's side, nuzzling her cheek gently. "You love them," she mewed and Sparkheart nodded.

"I do," Sparkheart admitted. "But they can be a pawful sometimes." They padded into the nursery and headed for the large nest that they occupied when spending time with the kits. Curling inside, Skytail pressed against her. "How was training Sappaw?"

Skytail thought of the catch he'd brought into camp and purred with satisfaction. "Good, he caught his first rabbit earlier." She

mewed, her voice filled with pride. She nodded to the prey-heap just outside of the nursery. "It almost got away, but he caught it."

Sparkheart leaned over and licked her cheek. "You've already taught him so much." She purred, her mew thick with warmth. "He's going to be a great warrior, just like you."

Skytail let herself be swallowed by the warmth and scent of her mate, her head becoming light. She closed her eyes, purring. When she blinked them open, she looked at Sparkheart. "I'm planning on taking him to the Gathering tonight." She mewed and saw her mate nod.

"It'll be exciting for him," the tabby warrior agreed. She pressed her muzzle against Skytail's. "When will you tell him?"

Skytail shrugged. "In a little bit," she answered as she touched noses with her mate. "Right now, I want to relax with you and the kits."

Sparkheart snorted softly, her eyes gleaming. "You can never relax with kits climbing over you." She pointed out humorously.

A squeak came from Cinderlight's nest and Featherkit's tabby head popped up from behind the light gray queen's rounded belly. "You're going to the Gathering?" She squeaked, and tumbled out of the nest, followed by Blizzardkit and Volekit. "Can we come?" She asked, her eyes shining with excitement with her tail sticking straight up.

Skytail shook her head, watching as her daughter's tail drooped. "You're not old enough to go to the Gathering." She told her. "In two moons, you can come."

Volekit stamped his paw, green eyes flashing with irritation. "What about Martenkit, Mistykit, and the others?" He protested, his eyes searching hers. "They say they're going!"

Sparkheart twitched her tail as it twined with Skytail's. "They aren't," she meowed firmly. "They're older than you, and they'll be apprentices soon. But for now, you kits stay in the nursery and the camp."

"Awwwww," Blizzardkit complained, his ears drooping as his tail tucked between his hind legs. He brightened suddenly, and he looked up at the two she-cats. "Will you tell us about the Gathering?" He asked hopefully.

"Every little detail," Skytail promised with a reassuring nod. Blizzardkit grinned widely and looked at the other kits. "Don't worry," she added. "When you're apprentices, you can come to the Gatherings with us."

Sparkheart poked her shoulder with a forepaw and she turned her head, confused. "You should go give Sappaw a heads up," she suggested. "That way he can have something to eat and get some sleep before leaving."

Skytail nodded and clambered out of the nest, stretching her limbs. Turning to the kits and her mate, she mewed. "I'll be back soon." Before spinning around and padding into the hollow.

Snow was falling lightly during the time she'd spent in the nursery and a fresh, thin layer crunched beneath her pads. Her breath puffed in front of her and she shook her head, dislodging the flakes that had clung to her ears and made them itch. Scanning the hollow, she saw Sandypaw and Saplingpaw chatting under the tree roots of the Fallen Tree. Gravelpaw and Muddypaw were close by, eating a rabbit while talking about their training.

Where is Sappaw? She wondered. A flicker of brown tabby fur caught her eye and she looked across the camp, seeing Shadepaw slipping out of the medicine cat's den with soiled moss between his teeth. Passing by Skytail as he went, he dipped his head swiftly before squeezing out through the dirtplace tunnel.

"Looking for someone, Skytail?" Mewed the friendly voice of Flintheart as the gray tom padded up. White snowflakes were clinging to his well-muscled frame and thick gray pelt, making it look dappled.

Skytail dipped her head respectfully to the older tom, her ears twitching in a greeting. "Yes," she answered as she raised her head to scan the camp again. "I was going to tell Sappaw that he's going

to the Gathering with me. Have you seen him?"

Flintheart twitched his whiskers, his amber eyes glowing like fire. "The Gathering, eh?" He mused and Skytail nodded. "That'll be good fun for him and Saplingpaw." His tail tip twitched back and forth as he looked around. "I thought I saw him going on a border patrol with Wollyfire, Driftbird, and Juniperblaze."

Icy fear grasped her heart and she struggled not to show it. "Do you know where they were going?" She asked, her voice shaking slightly.

"The ThunderClan border, I think." Flintheart responded, his eyes searching hers. "I'm going to see Finchsong, good luck finding Sappaw, Skytail." He dipped his broad head and headed for the nursery.

Skytail blinked after the ex-ThunderClan deputy and headed for the camp entrance. She barely walked a few pawsteps when the gorse came alive and Wollyfire's brown-and-white fur exploded from the bushes. His eyes were bright and his tail was bushed out, but he had scratches along his face and side. "Wollyfire?" She mewed, rushing forward to help the tunneler. "What's the matter?"

Wollyfire gasped for air as Sappaw, Driftbird, and Juniperblaze filed in after him. They looked shaken, but they didn't have any injuries. "We were ambushed by a bunch of rogues on our way back from the ThunderClan border." He reported, looking at Skytail.

"Did you get a good look at who attacked you?" Hawkpool questioned, hearing the report as she padded by. She touched noses with Sappaw before turning to the rest of the patrol.

"It was a red tabby she-cat with cherry-red fur, a black-and-white she-cat, a yellow tabby she-cat, and a blue tabby tom." Driftbird panted, looking around at Hawkpool and Skytail. "They came out of nowhere."

Skytail heard the blood roaring in her ears as she stared at the patrol. *Cherry attacked these cats,* she thought rapidly. "I-I'll be right back." She mewed and retreated toward the nursery. "Sparkheart!"

She called.

Her mate rushed from the den, her eyes wide and startled. "What is it?" She asked worriedly. "Is something wrong?"

"Wollyfire's patrol was attacked," she explained quickly. "I know who attacked them, but I need help to chase them away."

Sparkheart's eyes slid passed her and she stiffened. "You won't have to chase them away," she meowed and blinked. "They're here."

Confused, she turned around and felt her heart sink to her paws. There, at the camp entrance stood Blackthorne, Ziggy, Tiki, and Cherry. Skytail locked gazes with her mother, self-consciously putting a paw to her cheek where she'd been scratched all those moons ago.

"I am Cherry," mewed her mother loudly without breaking eye contact with her daughter. "This is Blackthorne, Ziggy, and Tiki. We wish to join your Clan."

Chapter 19

"Absolutely not!" Skytail burst out before Redstar could say anything. Cherry's brown eyes narrowed slightly and unsheathed her claws, digging them into the earth. Skytail felt her fur bristle and she widened her stance in case her mother sprung an attack. "You're not joining WindClan." She growled.

"Why not?" Redstar slipped to Skytail's side, his yellow eyes confused. Skytail bit her tongue. She didn't want to make a scene, but she knew her mother did. She glared at Cherry, but her mother didn't seem phased. His gaze flitted over the loners and his eyes turned thoughtful. "I think it'd be beneficial to have these cats in our Clan."

"Redstar." Skytail hissed, her teeth grinding together as she fought to urge to claw at his face. If her mother joined the Clan, she'd stir up trouble and that was something Skytail did not want.

Sparkheart rested her tail across Skytail's back, trying to comfort her clearly antagonized mate. "We do not know these cats," she pointed out to the leader. Her voice was much calmer than her mate's as she looked at Redstar. "Should we trust them? We don't know why they've come."

"I can answer that," Cherry meowed, her eyes smug as she looked at her daughter. "I want to be here with my kits." Her voice turned coaxing and slick, and Skytail felt her fur prickle suspiciously. "Since my mate died, I've wanted nothing more than to spend more time with my kits. Can you deny a mother's wish to be with her kits?"

"You're lying." Meowed the bold voice of Juniperblaze as he stepped forward, his ginger tabby fur fluffed up with indignation. Marshfrost was at his side, his three kits not far away with their mother. "You killed Maple and we came here to stay away from you."

Marshfrost lashed his tail. "I don't want a murderer in the Clan when I have kits in the nursery." He hissed, narrowing his brown eyes at Cherry.

Their mother's eyes flickered with surprise but she masked it quickly. "How could you accuse me of such a thing?" She faked offense and her eyes gleamed with hurt. Skytail curled her lip. "I loved Maple, why would I want to kill him?"

"Because you're a cold, heartless piece of mouse-dung." Snarled Skytail, taking a stride toward her mother threateningly. Beside her, Blackthorne, Ziggy, and Tiki narrowed their eyes and unsheathed their claws.

Cherry met her eyes calmly. "Sky, I know you're young and you think you know so much about the world because you joined this Clan." She meowed, her tone somewhat mocking. "But I know more than you ever will."

"Oh, really?" Skytail snorted, raising her head as her tail bushed out and lashed back and forth. Cherry nodded, a cocky jerk of her head that infuriated Skytail. "I know how to raise kits properly with a fantastic mate by my side."

"I loved your father." Cherry retorted, her ears flattening to her head. The collar around her neck caught Skytail's eye and hot anger flooded her once more.

"No, you didn't." She spat back. "You used him! You never loved him, or us! You let me run off to a Clan who I was told was bloodthirsty and ate bones!" Sparkheart let out a small gasp and Skytail looked over at her.

Cherry huffed. "You're young," she repeated. "You can't possibly have kits." She looked over at Marshfrost, who looked about ready to burst with anger. "Your brothers are far more capable to raise kits."

"You're wrong," Sparkheart spoke up and Skytail blinked at her mate. The tabby she-cat strode forward and stood over Cherry, her voice calm. "She knows how to raise kits the right way. From what

I've heard, you don't."

"And who are you?" Cherry snorted with a dramatic roll of her eyes. "Some little friend of Sky's who defends her when she's proven wrong?"

Sparkheart raised her chin. "No." She growled. "My name is Sparkheart. And I'm your daughter's mate." Cherry's eyes flashed with surprise as she went on. "We have six lovely kits who are raised with nothing but love and affection." She turned away from Cherry and raised her voice. "Featherkit!" She called.

Skytail turned her head as the little kit charged from the nursery and skidded to a halt between Sparkheart and Skytail. Warmth flooded through her at the sight of her daughter and she bent down to lick the top of her head.

"Who's that?" Featherkit asked curiously, staring at Cherry and the other loners. "Are they joining the Clan?"

"No, they aren't." Redstar meowed and padded over toward the kit, rubbing her head with a massive white forepaw. "Your mothers were just about to escort them out of our camp." He turned his yellow glare on Cherry and the fur along his spine rippled. "You may leave now."

Skytail watched as Cherry's eyes lit up with anger and padded to Sparkheart's side. "We'll show you out," she meowed formally and looked smugly at her mother. Cherry looked as though she wanted to argue, but Skytail pushed her backward and led the way out of the camp. As they walked through the gorse and sparse ferns that made up the camp entrance, Cherry turned on Skytail.

"How could you?" She spat, sounding horrified as her eyes drifted to Sparkheart. "Taking a she-cat as a mate? That little runt isn't your kit, is it? Neither are the other five you spoke of, are they?"

The fur lifted on her neck as she glared at her mother. "Sparkheart is the best mate I could ask for," she snapped angrily. "And my kits are my own. They'll always be my kits and I'll always claim them as mine." She raised her chin and lashed her tail. "Now leave our

territory before I claw your fur off."

Cherry lashed her tail once before she swung her head around and stalked down the slope, her companions following close behind with some hostile glares over at Sparkheart and Skytail as they went.

Sparkheart looked over at Skytail as the pointed she-cat sighed and padded over. She pressed her muzzle against her neck and nuzzled her cheek gently. "I know how hard that was for you," she breathed as she looked softly at her mate. "You did the right thing."

"Did I?" Skytail grunted. A sour taste filled her mouth as she watched her mother and the loners get smaller and smaller as they reached the stream border with ThunderClan. With the leafbare chill in the air, the stream is sure to freeze over, lending easier access to WindClan's rabbits for hungry ThunderClan warriors. "I don't think causing a scene in front of the entire Clan is a good thing."

"Look at me," Sparkheart ordered and Skytail glanced at her mate warily out of the corner of her eye. "Just because your mother shames you for who you are doesn't define you. The kits adore you and I love you. I don't care if your mother doesn't approve of us. What matters is that we have each other and always will." She pressed against Skytail's side, who let out a shuddering sigh. "Don't worry, my love," murmured the tabby she-cat. "I'll be here for you, always."

Skytail closed her eyes and rested her chin on Sparkheart's head. She breathed in her familiar, comforting scent and gently sighed. "Thank you," she whispered and licked Sparkheart around the ears. *As long as I have Sparkheart and the kits, I'll be okay.*

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The full-moon glowed over Skytail's head as she followed Redstar toward the Gathering Hollow. Sappaw was chattering with Saplingpaw, boasting about the rabbit he'd caught earlier that day. Sparkheart padded with Cloversong and Briarfern, talking quietly about hunting duties and border patrolling. Flintheart was striding

beside Skytail, his ears flat and eyes stormy with silent thoughts.

I wonder what ThunderClan will report this moon, she thought, peering through the trees. Her pelt itched with discomfort and she longed to be on the moor with the moon and stars over her head. *How do the other Clans live in the shadows of the trees?* She shuddered. *I'd go mad.*

"Skytail!" Sappaw called and Skytail turned her head as he bounded to her side, his eyes sparkling with excitement. "How many cats will be at the Gathering?"

Skytail shrugged. "I'm not sure," she admitted. "The Clans usually bring enough to not seem suspicious, but I think there won't be more than normal." She twitched her tail. "Are you ready to meet some apprentices?"

Sappaw nodded eagerly. "I can't wait!" He looked happy, and Skytail felt a burst of affection for her apprentice. *He's so young and carefree.* She thought with a grin. "Do the RiverClan cats actually swim? And do SkyClan cats really snatch birds from the sky?"

Flintheart looked at the apprentice with fake offense. "You don't want to know about ThunderClan?" He meowed teasingly, his eyes hurt. "They're your neighbors after all. Surely you want to know more about them, right?"

The honey-brown tabby apprentice stuck his tongue out at the former ThunderClan deputy, mischief glittering in his hazel eyes. "Ew, no!" He remarked, and Skytail chuckled to herself. "They smell funny!"

Skytail felt amusement tingle in her paws as she looked fondly at her apprentice. "I'm sure every Clan thinks each other smells funny," she commented. There was a sharp mew from up ahead and she looked forward and halted. Redstar was standing on a rock and he looked back and forth. Then, he leaped down and vanished on the other side of the rock. After a moment, Brackenmist followed with the rest of the Clan in suit.

Once they reached the bottom of the small hill, Sappaw gaped at

the scene. In front of them were cats that would give any cat a bad headache if they tried to count. Skytail breathed in through her nose, taking in each scent and picking apart each Clan.

Flintheart narrowed his eyes. "ThunderClan isn't here yet," he meowed warily and Skytail understood his concern. No cat knew what the forest-cats were going to plan in retaliation of the previous battles, and Skytail didn't want to wait long to find out.

"I'm sure they'll be here any moment now." Mewed the voice of Morningshine as the former deputy walked between the two warriors. The sudden appearence of the she-cat nearly knocked Skytail over, but she leaned against Sappaw to let the older cat through. "Now stop bickering and kep going."

Sappaw lowered his voice to a whisper as Morningshine stalked away. "Morningshine must have a thorn in her rear to be acting so angry." He meowed and Skytail choked back a laugh.

"Hey, Flintheart!" Called a blue-gray she-cat with a gray tom at her heels. "Long time no see! What are you doing in WindClan?"

Flintheart's eyes glowed with memories and he bounded forward, butting heads with the tom before touching noses with the she-cat. "Good to see you too, Bluepool and Thrushfur." He purred. "Where's Shadowfall? Is he still mooning over Robinfeather or did he give up?"

Bluepool shook her head. "They're mates now," she meowed and ushered him toward a crowd of cats unfamiliar to Skytail. Flintheart looked over his shoulder at her and she nodded, watching as he brightened and disappeared into the throng of cats.

Skytail looked to her right to see that Sappaw had gone as well. She saw him bounding away to join Muddypaw and Saplingpaw, who were approaching Hollypaw, Foxpaw, and Snailpaw of ShadowClan.

"Looks like ThunderClan won't be here for a while," observed Sparkheart as she fell in step beside Skytail. She nodded to the oak and birch forest where ThunderClan's territory began. "The leaders won't start the Gathering without them. What do you want to do

until they get here?"

Skytail shrugged, looking at the stars that dazzled the sky. "We have all night," she pointed out. "We can do whatever we want." Mischief flickered beneath her pelt and she tapped Sparkheart lightly on the shoulder and bounded a few paces away before turning back to her. "You're it!" She taunted.

Sparkheart blinked, confused before understanding lit in her blue gaze and she charged after Skytail. "You'll pay for that!" She called, determination glittering in her eyes.

"I don't think so!" Skytail yowled over her shoulder. She knew she could easily outrun her mate, but she didn't want to seem like she was trying to show off. Instead, she slipped behind a group of pine-smelling cats and tried to look like she was interested in the stories they were telling.

"Do you remember when Badgerleaf trod on an adder when he was a 'paw?" Meowed one of them, a golden tabby tom who Skytail thought was named Honeysky. The other cats around him nodded.

A yellow tabby she-cat twitched her nose. "He got a nasty bite from it," she told Skytail, who nodded as though she'd been listening the whole time. "He did manage to catch it and bring it back for the younger cats to admire, though."

"Hey, Skytail!" Called a familiar voice and the moor runner turned to see Oakfire, Moonwing, and Cloudwing padding toward her.

Skytail broke apart from the ShadowClan warriors to greet her friends with a purr. "Been a while, huh?" She meowed as she dipped her head to each cat. "How have you three been?"

Cloudwing puffed out her chest. "Our kits have become apprentices," she meowed proudly, leaning against Moonwing as the tom nodded silently to Skytail. She knew the tom meant well, but he was a cat of few words. "Have you seen them?"

Skytail nodded, gesturing with her tail where Sappaw was with his brother, Muddypaw, and the newest ShadowClan apprentices. "I got

an apprentice a few sunrises ago," she meowed, looking back at the ShadowClan warriors.

Oakfire twitched one ear. "Really?" He meowed, sounding surprised. "Are they here?"

"Yep," Skytail nodded to Sappaw, who was laughing at something the other cats said. "Sappaw is an excellent apprentice, if a bit shy and nervous." She chuckled, and the other cats joined in. "What about you? Have you got apprentices yet?"

Oakfire snorted. "Of course not," he meowed dryly. "Vixenstar doesn't think we're worthy enough of training young cats." His voice was annoyed, but Skytail couldn't help but laugh at the tom's disappointment.

A sudden thought hit her like a blow. "My daughter will become an apprentice soon," she blurted out and the ShadowClan warriors stared at her in shock.

"You have kits?" Moonwing meowed, the first thing he'd said all night. Skytail nodded. "Incredible. What's her name?"

"Featherkit." Skytail felt her heart warm at the thought of her daughter, then she froze as she realized that Featherkit would have to train to hunt, fight, and patrol the territory. Icy fear washed over her as she pictured the ferocious ThunderClan and SkyClan warriors willing to rip the fur off any cat who confronts them.

Oakfire opened his mouth to ask another question, but he looked by her and his eyes sharpened. "ThunderClan is here," he warned and Skytail looked over her shoulder to see Copperstar stalking toward them with Waspheart and a gray she-cat at each side.

Skytail stiffened and dug her paws into the cold ground, narrowing her eyes as the ThunderClan leader shouldered past and headed for the other leaders.

"About time!" Icestar of RiverClan grumbled as the tom clawed his way up the tree trunk and balanced on a lower branch than the other leaders. Redstar narrowed his eyes at the ThunderClan leader

but said nothing. "Let this moon's Gathering begin!"

"If I may, I'd like to start." Vixenstar mewed, checking with the other leaders in case they wanted to go instead. When they didn't speak up, she looked at the gathered cats below. "ShadowClan has three new apprentices! Please welcome Hollypaw, Snailpaw, and Foxpaw!"

Skytail raised her voice to chant with the other cats. "Hollypaw! Snailpaw! Foxpaw!" She cheered, flashing the kits' mother and father a warm glance.

"Congratulations, Vixenstar." Meowed Icestar as she flicked her tail to the ShadowClan leader. The calico leader dipped her head. "RiverClan has nothing to report this moon other than we're prepared for what leafbare throws at us."

Squirrelstar began his report. "SkyClan has plenty new warriors. Please welcome Whitewhisker, Minkfoot, Appleheart, Featherbird, Timberwing, Cloverstream, Lightwhisker, Fernstep, Dawnslip, Leafstrike, and Lilybird!"

"Your warrior's den must be bursting with warriors," commented Redstar, his voice neutral. Squirrelstar nodded and the WindClan leader looked around at the crowd of cats. "WindClan has five new apprentices! Please welcome Muddypaw, Sandypaw, Gravelpaw, Sappaw, and Saplingpaw!"

Skytail spotted her apprentice puffing out his chest with Saplingpaw at his side and felt a burst of pride as she straightened up. "Sappaw! Saplingpaw!" She chanted.

"Our nursery is so full, we've had to dig out more room for them to sleep in." Redstar purred loudly, and it sounded like a horde of bees as the other Clans joined in.

"Kits are always a good sign," meowed Vixenstar as she nodded to Copperstar. "You're the last one to arrive, Copperstar. You know the rules."

Copperstar grunted and he raised his chin. "My Clan has a new

deputy after the loss of Flintheart in a skirmish with WindClan. Waspheart took his place and is a better deputy than he could ever have been." He growled and lashed his tail. "That is all I have to report. ThunderClan! We're leaving!" As he leaped down from his branch, Cloudwing leaned over and hissed in Skytail's ear.

"What's got his tail in a twist?" The ShadowClan warrior looked warily at the ThunderClan leader as he was swept away by his warriors back to his territory. "Speaking so poorly of the former deputy. He's not even dead!"

Skytail shrugged. She didn't know what Copperstar wanted from her and WindClan, but she wondered what that would mean for her Clan. *If he's planning an attack, he'll be sorry.*

Chapter 20

"Today's the day!" Featherkit's mew broke into Skytail's dream and she felt her daughter pounce on her face, her belly fur smothering her. "Wake up! Wake up!"

Beside her, Sparkheart groaned and shifted in the large nest. "Your daughter...awake." She mumbled, her voice sluggish with sleep.

Skytail grunted, her eyes still closed. "Before sunhigh, she's your daughter." She sighed loudly and cracked open an eye. "Featherkit, what are you so excited about?" She groaned.

"I'm being apprenticed today!" Her daughter declared, her chest fur puffing out with excitement. "Wake up!"

Skytail opened her eyes and yawned, stretching in the nest in the nursery. They often slept in the nursery to be with Featherkit, Darkfeather's kits, and Wispwren's kits. With so many tiny paws scampering around, it was normal to be woken up to play. "Is it really?" She meowed. Two moons since the Gathering, Skytail hadn't thought of the day coming for Featherkit to become an apprentice.

Featherkit nodded eagerly. "I can't wait to find out who my mentor will be!" She jumped up and down and Skytail had to plant her paw on her tail to stop her. "Who do you think will mentor me? I hope it isn't Greenscar or Morningshine!" She shuddered as if with a cold. "They're so mean and scary!"

Sparkheart sat up in the nest, her eyes bleary with sleep. "Is it that day already?" She yawned and sat up, leaning against Skytail as she looked drowsily at the kit. When Featherkit nodded, Sparkheart pulled her close with a paw. "Then you need to get cleaned up. You don't want to look like a ball of moss when you go outside."

Skytail purred as Featherkit started to protest before Sparkheart started lapping at her fur, smoothing it down. She got to her feet

and headed for the nursery entrance. She poked her head out to see Redstar padding onto the Fallen Tree. "You'd better hurry," she warned Sparkheart over her shoulder. "Redstar's about to call the Clan together."

Sparkheart gave Featherkit's chest one final lick before raising her head to look down at the kit. "Don't mess up your fur, or I'll have to wash you again." She meowed sternly and padded over to Skytail, brushing her cheek along her chin lovingly.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Fallen Tree for a Clan meeting!" Called Redstar from outside the den.

"It's time!" Chirped Featherkit as she made a break for the entrance.

Skytail blocked her with a paw and gave her a stern yet amused look. "Wait a moment," she ordered and glanced out of the nursery for a heartbeat before standing at the kit's side. "Now we can go."

"We have many kits among us who has reached their sixth moon and are ready to join our ranks as apprentices." Redstar was meowing as they stepped out of the nursery and walked up the small incline and peered up at the tom. "Featherkit, Martenkit, Mistykit, Shellkit, Brindlekit, Weaselkit, Smokekit, Poppykit, and Graykit, please come forward." He purred. The kit scampered forward with an eager squeak and scrambled to a halt in front of the leader. "Featherkit, from this moment on until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Featherpaw. Briarfern, you are a strong and confident warrior. You are ready to take on your first apprentice. Train Featherpaw to be the greatest moor runner this Clan can be proud of."

Briarfern rose to his paws and picked his way through the gathered cats to reach his apprentice. They touched noses, exchanged a few excited words, and sat down in the crowd.

Redstar continued to name Darkfeather and Brackenmist's kits as apprentices. Martenpaw got Twigflower as his mentor, Mistypaw got Eagleheart, Shellpaw got Cloversong, Brindlepaw got Sparkheart, Weaselpaw got Myrtlestorm, Smokepaw got Wollyfire,

Poppypaw got Slatefall, and Graypaw got Driftbird.

Once the meeting was over, Skytail hurried up to Featherpaw to congratulate her. "Well done!" She purred as Sparkheart ran at her heels and nuzzled Featherpaw.

"You'll be a fantastic apprentice," added Sparkheart as she looked at Briarfern. "You'll take care of her, right?" She questioned.

Her brother rolled his yellow-green eyes and waved his paw dismissively. "Of course I will," he responded loftily. "Your kit is going to be fine." He turned to his new apprentice, who beamed back at him. "How about we go tour around the territory?" He suggested. "When we come back, we can start learning how to hunt."

Featherpaw gave an excited bounce with a squeak to accompany it. "I can't wait!" She ran after her mentor as he led the way down the slight decline and they headed for the camp entrance. She halted for a moment, and glanced over her shoulder at Sparkheart and Skytail, her head tipped to one side as though asking for permission.

Skytail gave her a small nod, and the apprentice bounded out of the camp after her mentor. "I'm glad she's finally out of the nursery," she meowed. Turning to Sparkheart, she touched her nose to her cheek. "I love her, but she would've driven me crazy!"

Sparkheart purred with amusement and looked teasingly at her. "Don't forget that we have to babysit Wispwren's kits until they're apprentices too." She reminded her, and Skytail groaned. Her mate nudged her side and she stood up. "Let's go ask Brackenmist if he can send us on a patrol."

"We're warriors," Skytail pointed out slyly. "We can go on our own patrol whenever we want." Her heart fluttered at the amused and understanding glint in her mate's eyes. She cleared her throat and spoke in a formal tone. "Sparkheart, would you like to go on a patrol with me?"

Sparkheart rolled her eyes and dipped her head, playing along. "I suppose I can spare the time," she teased and rose to her full height. "But you'll have to catch me first!" She added and quickly ran down to the camp entrance.

"Not fair!" Skytail scurried after her mate, joy and energy flooding through her as she chased her out of the camp and onto the open moor. She hurtled herself after Sparkheart, pressing her paws hard against the cold earth.

Sparkheart looked over her shoulder and planted her paws down and spun around, twirling in a circle before Skytail slammed into her. They tumbled down the hill, laughing and cheering as they flipped and somersaulted before skidding to a stop.

Skytail laughed as she laid on top of Sparkheart, her paws splayed out on her fluffy chest. "That was fun!" She purred loudly and looked down at her mate.

Sparkheart's face was soft with a loving smile and she brushed a blade of moorland grass off her ear gently with one forepaw. Her eyes were feather-soft, and Skytail rested her chin on Sparkheart's chest and sighed.

"I with everyday could be like this," she meowed, somewhat breathless from their tumble. Her head buzzed with dizziness as she looked up at her mate. "Carefree and having a good time."

Sparkheart let out a small snort and shook her head slowly. "If everyday was like this, we'd become too cocky for our own good." A sly glint made its way into her blue eyes and she teased. "But, you're already cocky enough as it is."

Skytail opened her mouth to reply, when a shrill squeal made her pelt spike up. She scrambled off Sparkheart and shot to her paws, looking around. "That sounded like Featherpaw!" She meowed worriedly to Sparkheart. "Come on!"

"Skytail, wait!" Sparkheart ran after her as she sprinted up the slope, dodged around a boulder, and made way to where a gray tabby

shape was standing with a brown tabby facing her.

"Featherpaw!" She screeched, running as fast as she could go. *If that cat harms one hair on her pelt, I'll shred them!* "Look out!" She launched herself at the brown tabby, knocking him off his paws and latching onto his fur with her claws. She twisted and thrust him into the ground, teeth bared.

Paws ripped at her back as she was hauled off by Sparkheart and Featherpaw. "Get off him, Skytail!" Came her mate's scolding voice. Skytail blinked hard and saw Briarfern staring with shock up at her, her paws planted firmly on his chest with her claws digging in.

"Oh, sorry," she mumbled and looked at the ground.

Briarfern laid on his back, stunned, before rolling over and getting to his paws. He shook out his brown tabby fur and shrugged. "It happens," he meowed simply. "I wouldn't be the first cat to be mistaken as an enemy." He turned to Featherpaw. "Come on, let's head back to the camp. You have apprentice duties to tend to."

Featherpaw let out a whine as she followed her mentor up the slope. "But the others can do them!" Skytail heard Briarfern chuckling as they got out of earshot.

Sparkheart padded in front of Skytail, her eyes concerned. "Are you okay?" She questioned.

"I'm fine."

Her mate snorted. "You'd think I'd swallow that?" She shook her head and her eyes and voice softened. "You nearly ripped my brother's throat out, Skytail. Are you sure you're okay?"

"I said I'm fine!" Skytail snapped harshly, guilt flooding her belly and she sighed. "I just want to be alone, sorry." She looked up at her mate, surprised to see her blue eyes glittering with understanding.

Sparkheart nuzzled her cheek gently. "I'll be back at the camp when you get back," she promised and ran off after Featherpaw and Briarfern.

Skytail silently thanked Sparkheart and got to her feet. She headed for the direction of ThunderClan's border. She was thirsty, and the stream was burbling nearby. It wasn't completely frozen when she crouched by the shore, and the icy sting burned her throat and the water dripped from her whiskers.

There was a gasp from the far side of the border and she raised her head. "It-it's you!" The other cat looked oddly familiar. A red-brown she-cat with a purple-red collar and hazel eyes. Of course! *It's the cat from the cave-in!*

"It sure is, isn't it?" Skytail meowed blandly and went back to drinking. She drank until her throat was burning from the chill and her tongue was numb. "See you around, kittypet." She meowed over her shoulder as she started for the camp.

"Wait!" She halted at the she-cat's call and turned her head warily. "Aren't you going to threaten to shred my ears for trespassing?" The kittypet seemed confused, and Skytail inwardly purred. *Do kittypets really think Clan cats are that bad?*

"No." She replied, her paws working against the ground. "Why should I? You're not on my territory, so you can do what you please over there." She nodded to the trees. "Goodluck, though. Those ThunderClan warriors are bad news."

The kittypet hesitated before splashing through the stream and emerging on the other side. Skytail felt the fur along her spine raise as she crossed the border. *She doesn't know,* she reminded herself as her claws unsheathed. *She's just a kittypet. She probably doesn't know of Clan customs.* "You live here?" Skytail nodded stiffly. "Why?"

"Why not?" She flashed back. "Why do you live with Twolegs in red dens made of red stone?" She shook her head and let her tail lash. "Get off my territory before I shred your fur and line my nest with it." The kittypet's eyes flashed, but not with fear. *Stupid furball! Get out of here before you're seen by a patrol and we both get in trouble!*

"Now you start the threats?" The kittypet flattened her ears, and Skytail narrowed her eyes. "A few moments ago, you didn't mind I was here."

"That's because you weren't on my Clan's territory." Skytail snapped back, her anger rising. She took a threatening step toward the kittypet. "Now get out of here before I make good on my threat."

The she-cat huffed and rolled her eyes. *She's brave, for a kittypet.* Skytail thought with a pang of admiration. *Brave, or stupid.* "You Clan cats think you own everything." She grumbled with a disapproval look at Skytail. "You may live here, but this land isn't yours."

Skytail snorted crossly. "Really?" She returned the kittypet's scorching glare. "If it isn't ours, then who does it belong to?" She lashed her tail, and the kittypet didn't answer. "My point. Now get out of here before I call a patrol and we chase you out."

The she-cat narrowed her eyes slightly and whisked her tail. "What's your name?" She took a step closer, and Skytail let out a warning hiss that stopped her in her tracks.

"Not one more step," she spat and shook out her bristling fur, eyeing the kittypet warily. "What's it to you, anyway? Last time we met, *I* was the one to ask for your name and *you* nearly clawed my fur off."

The kittypet snorted. "You're right," she meowed, much to Skytail's surprise. "My name is Apple. What's yours?"

"Skytail."

Apple wrinkled her nose and her eyes turned into hazel slits. "That's a weird name." She considered and turned away, her tail flicking. "Well, I'll be off. See you later, Skytail." She meowed over her shoulder as she splashed across the stream and ran into the trees on the other side.

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"Skytail! Skytail!" Skytail pricked her ears as Martenpaw, his littermates, and Featherpaw ran to meet her as she returned to the WindClan camp. She watched fondly as they cheered her name. The apprentices clustered around her, chattering all at once about

training sessions, hunting practice, and how much Jayfang complains about ticks and fleas.

Spotting Sparkheart watching with silent amusement, Skytail felt her heart warm with love and care. She started towards her mate, the apprentices yapping at her heels. *I can't imagine my life without her,* she thought, her head spinning. *How could I ever have lived without her?*

Chapter 21

"Skytail, wake up!" Muddypaw poked her with a fat dark brown paw, rousing Skytail from her slumber. "Brackenmist wants you on a hunting patrol with Sappaw before the first snowfall." He mewed, pacing in front of her.

"Alright, Muddypaw," she sighed and sat up, shaking scraps of downy feathers and heather from her fur. She rose to her paws, surprised when she staggered forward, nearly carrying Muddypaw off his paws.

"Hey!" The tunneling apprentice yelped, leaping back to avoid being crushed to the ground. "When did you get as heavy-footed as a badger?" He looked at Skytail, and his eyes twinkled with wonder.

Skytail flicked his ears with her tail. "What would Fernpelt do if he heard you say that, hm?"

Muddypaw dropped his yellow gaze to the ground and scuffed his paws. "He'd make me pick ticks off Jayfang for a moon." He mumbled.

Skytail purred with amusement and prodded his shoulder with a paw. "Then run along and catch up with Fernpelt," she meowed affectionately. "It's time for your warrior's assessment, isn't it?"

The tunneling apprentice nodded in excitement. "I can't wait to be a full tunneler!" He boasted as they headed out of the warrior's den, Skytail lagging behind. Her paws felt strangely heavy and she felt misshapen. "I'll be the first cat to tunnel beneath all the Clans' territory!"

"Is that so?" Teased the voice of Twigflower as the long-legged pale-gray moor runner padded up to them. She gave Muddypaw a warm and taunting glance. "Martenpaw wants to go hunting with you," she turned her head to Skytail. "Would you take him? Fernpelt wants me to go with him and this lump of fur." She playfully shoved

him, and Muddypaw looked flustered.

Skytail nodded. She looked at Muddypaw, and saw the admiration in the younger tom's yellow eyes. "Would you get Sappaw for me?" She prompted. "I'll go see Brackenmist."

Muddypaw nodded. "Sure!" He meowed enthusiatically. "See you later, Twigflower." He purred to the she-cat as he headed dutifully toward the apprentice's den.

Once he was gone, Twigflower met Skytail's gaze. Her blue eyes shone as she tipped her head to one side. "Have you been eating more?" She asked. Her tone wasn't suspicious, only curious. "You look like you swallowed a badger!"

Skytail purred with amusement and swatted at the she-cat's pointed ears. "Oh, hush!" She chuckled and looked over at Muddypaw as he vanished into the apprentice's den. "Are you two going to become mates when he's a warrior?" She asked.

Twigflower looked startled at her question, and Skytail saw her flatten her fur. "O-of course not!" She protested, her voice high-pitched with denial.

The older warrior purred, amused. "Is that so?" She teased. "We won't hear the patter of tiny paws anytime soon?" Twigflower shook her head and moved off quickly, sending Skytail a glance over her shoulder as she went. Skytail let out a *mrrow* of laughter and headed for the Clan deputy.

Brackenmist looked up from talking to Morningshine and greeted Skytail with a friendly twitch of his ears. "I want you to lead a hunting patrol," he meowed when she reached him. "Go to the barn on the outskirts of our territory. Take Sappaw, Ravenstem, Myrtlestorm, Parsleyfrost, Weaselpaw, and Furzeshine. I'm sure Pepper and Naoki won't mind if we do a bit of ratting and mouse-hunting."

Skytail tipped her head to one side. *I didn't know there was a barn in our territory.* She thought with a respectful dip of her head. Sappaw was emerging from the apprentice's den with Muddypaw at his side.

They were laughing together, and Skytail purred slightly. "Sappaw!" She called, alerting her apprentice as he bid farewell to his friend and bounded over.

"Hi, Skytail!" He chirped happily, his eyes gleaming. "What are we doing today? Patrolling the territory? Or are we hunting?" He dropped into a hunting crouch that looked slightly sloppy, Skytail noticed, but didn't have the heart to point it out. "You name it, and I'll do it!"

Skytail flicked his ears with a paw. "Settle down," she chided gently. "We're going hunting at the barn in our territory." Sappaw's eyes stretched wide like suns.

"Where the loners live?" Skytail nodded and his eyes stretched wider. "Will there be trouble? I'll fight off any cat!"

"Now now, we don't know if there will be any trouble at all." She reminded him and Sappaw nodded, still looking eager. "But if there is, you'll be staying away from the fight."

Sappaw's eyes lit up with protest. "But I want to defend my Clan!" He whined, his tail drooping. "I'm a warrior, not a declawed kittypet!"

Skytail rested her tail across his shoulders. "I know you want to fight for your Clan," she meowed sympathetically. "But you don't have any battle training yet and wouldn't last a heartbeat in a real fight." She touched her nose comfortingly to his. "Don't worry about it, though. When you're a bit bigger and used to the moorland, we'll start your battle training."

"What's this I hear about battle training?" Weaselpaw squealed as she bounded up to stand next to Sappaw. She was larger and taller than him, but he hardly seemed to care as he beamed at his denmate. "Can I come?"

"Certainly not right now," came the voice of Weaselpaw's mentor, Myrtlestorm as the moor runner padded up with the other cats on the patrol. She looked sternly at her apprentice, who seemed crushed. "Sappaw is new to training, he won't be practicing with

you and your older denmates for a long time. And by then, you'll already be a warrior."

Ravenstem twitched his ears as though chasing away a fly. "Let's get on with this patrol," he urged with a glance over his shoulder where, following his gaze, Skytail saw Lakespots pad into the nursery. "I want to get this over with."

Furzeshine nudged the senior warrior with her nose. "In a hurry, Ravenstem?" She teased and the black warrior huffed, looking away from the younger she-cat. She looked at Skytail curiously. "Where are we going anyway?"

"The barn in our territory," replied Sappaw before his mentor could speak. She gave him an annoyed look, and he licked his chest in embarrassment.

"Brackenmist wants us to go ratting and mouse-hunting for the loners that live there." Skytail meowed, one eye on Weaselpaw and Sappaw before turning to the warriors. "I've never been there or met them, are they friendly?"

Furzeshine and Myrtlestorm shrugged, but Parsleyfrost and Ravenstem nodded.

"I met them once when I was chasing a plump rabbit over by the Twoleg farm." The pale-gray tom recalled, tipping his head back as he remembered. "One of them named Pepper saved us from a dog by getting us up a tree while another one- I think her name was Naoki- led the dog away."

Ravenstem nodded. "That was the day we learned Pepper was expecting kits." His green eyes filled with questions. "I wonder if she's had them yet."

Parsleyfrost nudged the older warrior's shoulder with his nose. "With how much Ebony and Ziggy take care of them, I'm pretty certain the kits will be fine."

"We don't have all day," warned Skytail. Her paws itched to see the barn, and she wanted to get back to the camp as quick as possible

to catch a nap. "Let's get going."

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"Pepper!" Ravenstem yowled as he charged the rest of the way up the steep incline toward a gray-and-white she-cat.

"Ravenstem? Is that you?" Gasped the she-cat as she bounded down to meet the senior warrior. "It is you!" She butted heads with the fluffy black tom and her gaze slid down to the rest of the tired patrol. "Parselypaw! Welcome back! Did you get that rabbit?"

"Hi, Pepper." Parsleyfrost purred and touched noses with the loner. "I did, and Jayfang sends his thanks. He says it was the best rabbit he ever tasted."

Pepper looked flustered and a pink blush bloomed on her cheeks. "He's such a flirt," she purred and looked at the other cats. "Hi, Sky!" She greeted warmly.

Skytail blinked. She hadn't heard her loner name in so long since Cherry was thrown out of the territory, and it sounded strange. "How do you know me?" She asked.

The she-cat purred. "I've known about you since you were a tiny kit about the size of a rat! You were a little thing, and your father was so proud of you." She looked her up and down. "What are you doing with WindClan warriors? Are they keeping you? Do I need to beat some sense into Ravenstem?" She sent the warrior a sly look, and he stuck his tongue out at her.

Skytail shook her head. She liked this cat, despite the loner's strange humor. "No no, it's okay. I joined WindClan a long time ago." She felt her fur prickle at the she-cat's curious stare, but Pepper didn't push further.

Instead, she looked at Myrtlestorm, Weaselpaw, and Sappaw. "Hello! Welcome to my barn!" She mewed, her voice cheerful and content.

Ravenstem nudged her side. "Where's Ebony and Naoki? Are they around?" He scanned the side of the red wall where the barn stood

firm a fox-length ahead. "Brackenmist wants us to do some ratting and mousing, if you'll let us." He added quickly.

Pepper gave him an affectionate purr. "Of course! You're always welcome in the barn." She twitched her whiskers at Sappaw's stare and Skytail looked at her apprentice, surprised to see the star-struck glaze over his yellow eyes. "Come on, then, you're probably exhausted!"

Skytail padded alongside Parsleyfrost and Weaselpaw as they entered the wooden barn and breathed in the familiar scent of hay and mice. A pang of sadness stabbed her heart as she eyed the hayloft longingly. She pictured her father lounging on one of the wood beams that stretched through the empty air, connecting with the other side of the wall.

"You can go up there if you'd like," Pepper offered, stopping beside her and catching her stare. "It's nice and peaceful."

Ignoring the tug of home on the other side of Skytail's heart, she shook her head. "We're not staying long," she meowed to the loner. "Can you show us where the mice and rats are?"

Pepper gestured with her tail around the barn. "You lived in a barn before," she meowed. "Surely you hunted there too?"

Skytail wanted to tell her that she never got to, but she held her tongue and dipped her head. "Sappaw! Weaselpaw! Come over here!" She called to the apprentices as they sniffed the huge doors. "We're here to hunt, let's get to it."

By the time they were done hunting, Skytail felt hungry and tired. She'd managed to catch four mice and a rat, which had nearly bitten her before she killed it with a swift blow to its neck. She breathed hard as she saw Sappaw carrying a huge rat and two mice. Weaselpaw carried two rats by their tails, gazing admiringly at Sappaw's catch.

"Nice catch, Sappaw and Weaselpaw," complemented Ebony as the black tom slid from the hayloft and leaped down with three mice dangling from their tails. He dropped them at his paws and looked

at Skytail approvingly. He'd introduced himself as the mate of Pepper and the father of Rowan and Carrot, his new kits that were about two moons old.

Pepper strode to her mate's side with her own two mice in her jaws. She put them down and touched her nose to his cheek. "Which one shall we give them?" She asked in a low, fretful murmur.

Ebony looked at her with a deep sadness in his hazel eyes. "I'd say both of them. They grew up with each other, and it'd be cruel to split them apart." Skytail guessed they were talking about their kits, who were playing with each other in a bale of hay in a corner.

Pepper nodded and turned to Ravenstem, who entered with a brown tabby she-cat with teal eyes at his side. "We've decided to give you both Rowan and Carrot this time around." She meowed, her voice clogged with sadness. At Ravenstem's wide-eyed response, she explained. "They grew up knowing that they'd always be together. We don't want them to be split up."

Ravenstem's gaze held a deep sense of respect for the young mother and he dipped his head to her. "StarClan honors every sacrifice you make for WindClan, Pepper. WindClan will forever be thankful for the new members."

Realization flashed through Skytail as Ebony slunk off to get his two sons and she stepped toward Pepper. "You can't do that!" She protested, her heart ripping in two. "They're *your* kits, not ours! Keep them!"

Pepper turned her yellow gaze on Skytail and she saw the love of a mother who knew what she was doing. "Skytail, Ravenstem has told me of your relationship with Sparkheart and your personal relationship with your kits." She mewed. "Rowan and Carrot are not suitable for living as barn cats. The twolegs that live on the farm don't like kits, which is why we give them to WindClan, where they will be trained and safe."

The grief that ripped at her heart increased as she saw Rowan and Carrot and pictured them as Featherpaw and her other kits. She tore

her gaze away as they obliviously chatted with Weaselpaw and Sappaw about hunting and running on the moor. *You precious little things,* she thought sadly, *I hope you have long seasons ahead of you.*

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"By the powers of StarClan, I grant you your warrior name. Muddypaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Muddythorn. StarClan honors your impressive tunneling abilities in linking us up to the stream by the ThunderClan border, and we welcome you as a full warrior of WindClan." Meowed Redstar as he rested his chin on the new warrior's head as he licked his shoulder.

"Muddythorn! Gravelpelt! Sandytail!" Cheers rose from around Skytail, making her nauseous. She bit her tongue and weakly joined in, sounding unenthusiastic compared to the Clans' joyous cries.

From beside her, Sparkheart looked questioningly at Skytail, but didn't say anything until the cheers died down. "Are you okay?" She whispered, and Skytail nodded, the movement making her dizzy.

"Before I dismiss you," Redstar went on, "I'd like to welcome five new apprentices to our ranks." His yellow gaze rested on Breezekit, Cherrykit, Shrewkit, Darkkit, and Heatherkit, who were neatly groomed and sitting eagerly beside Finchsong and the other queens. "Come forward, you five."

Breezekit padded forward with her littermates, her head and tail high and her green eyes shining with pride and excitement. Her siblings followed close behind, Cherrykit and Heatherkit at her side.

"Breezekit," purred Redstar as the kits halted in the center of the clearing. "From this moment on, until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known as Breezepaw. The mentor I have chosen for you is..." The world around Skytail spun and she staggered to her feet, bumping into Hawkpool and the she-cat sprang to her paws.

"What is the matter with you?" Demanded the she-cat, glaring at Skytail as she swayed on her paws. Realization flooded her orange eyes and she shouted. "Softear! Shadepaw!"

Skytail was already rushing for the dirtplace, the world shifting around her as bile rose in her throat. Cats leaped out of her way, making a clear path for her to get through. She faintly could hear Featherpaw calling after her, but the warrior was already gagging. When she reached the dirtplace, she threw up all the prey she'd eaten until a gross heap lay at her paws.

"Skytail!" Sparkheart's anxious call rang in her ears, clear as day as her mate bounded to her side. "Are you okay?" She touched Skytail's shoulder with her nose and drew back sharply. "You're burning up!"

Skytail blinked slowly at her mate, feeling off-balance as she staggered. The world went dark as she crumpled to the ground

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"Is she going to be okay?"

"She can't be sick!"

"We'll look after her as much as we can. We'll call for you as soon as she wakes up."

Skytail felt hot all over her body, and she cracked open one eye to peer at the cats talking. She could make out Sparkheart's red tabby fur, and Featherpaw's small gray shape, but she couldn't tell who else was talking. *Shadepaw maybe? Or Softear?* Her throat felt dry and scratchy, her mouth tasted of foul vomit and she shifted in her nest. She assumed she was in the medicine cat den, and she felt something sharp stab her belly and she let out a feeble cry.

"She's awake!" Cried Sparkheart and pawsteps thundered against the floor of the den until they abruptly halted. Sparkheart hissed, but Skytail couldn't see who she was hissing at. "Let me through! She's my mate!"

"She's ill," meowed the calm voice of Softear, and Skytail felt her claws prick the ground. "Whatever she has might be contagious, and we don't want it spreading around." There was a note of worry lining the she-cat's undertone, but Skytail was too weak to point it out. "Come back later when she's a bit stronger."

Featherpaw cast Skytail a worried look. "She will get better, won't she?" She mewed quietly, glancing at Sparkheart with wide green eyes round with fear.

Sparkheart wrapped her tail around Featherpaw's shoulders and held her close, one eye on Skytail. "Of course she will," she murmured and looked at Softear. "We'll be the first to know if something happens, right?" She checked.

Softear nodded. "Of course, now let her rest." Once they were gone, she padded over to Skytail, who groaned. "How are you feeling?" She asked, her voice gentle with concern.

"Thirsty," croaked the she-cat as she shifted her paws more comfortably beneath her. "And like I've thrown up an entire badger." Softear chuckled gently and pushed a wad of dripping moss against Skytail's muzzle. Skytail lapped thirstily at it, reveling in the icy sting and cool chill. "That's delicious." She rasped.

"Do you know what happened?" Softear questioned, whisking the ball away once the warrior was done. "What made you sick?"

Skytail shook her head, the water giving her a little burst of energy. "I-I'm not sure," she admitted. "I haven't eaten anything today, maybe I just got a cold?" Her mew was hopeful, but the look of Softear's face crushed it.

The medicine cat shook her head slowly. "I've seen this in expectant mothers," she meowed, keeping her voice soft. "Skytail, you're pregnant, and you may have just lost your kits."

A shocking wave of numbness washed over Skytail at the news, and she stared blankly up at the medicine cat. *Kits? But I've only ever mated with...* Icy fear replaced the numbness and she jerked her head up, and regretted it as it whirled. *Sparkheart!* "K-kits?" She rasped. "B-but how? Sparkheart and I are both she-cats!"

Softear gently touched Skytail's shoulder with the tip of her tail. "I don't know," she answered honestly. "It's confusing me to me as well, but I believe either you've lost your litter, or are experiencing early symptoms of pregnancy."

Skytail pushed herself unsteadily to her paws, her belly clenching as she thought of the tiny lives growing inside of her. *Sparkheart won't believe me!* She gazed at Softear, who was silently watching her. "M-May I go find her?" She asked quietly.

The medicine cat nodded. "Come right back," she meowed and nodded to the hardened clay slab at the back of the den. "I want you to take some herbs and move into the nursery quickly."

Nodding slowly, Skytail stumbled for the den entrance. The climb up the slight incline felt like a nightmare as she thought of the kits in her belly. *Please, don't let them be gone!* She spotted Sparkheart sharing a lapwing with Briarfern and Cloversong. On paws that felt like stones, Skytail made her way toward her.

Sparkheart looked up and spat out the bite of lapwing she was chewing. "Skytail! You're okay!" She hurried toward Skytail, who backed away, fear washing over her. "What's the matter?"

"I-I need to speak with you," Skytail whispered. A stone formed in her belly, weighing her down. Sparkheart's eyes flashed with understanding and she nodded. They headed for behind the leader's den, and Sparkheart led the way.

"When did you get so slow?" Teased the tabby she-cat as she glanced over her shoulder at Skytail. "You're a moor runner!"

Skytail didn't answer. The stone that was in her belly grew to fill her body and she lowered her ears. "Sparkheart," she meowed hesitantly and her mate faced her, concern in her blue eyes. "I-I have to tell you something. B-but you may not believe me."

Sparkheart let out an amused laugh that was short. "I won't know if I will or not if you don't tell me." She chuckled and Skytail nodded, grateful for her humor.

"I-I know." Skytail meowed quickly and sighed. "I-I'm expecting your kits." She went on before Sparkheart could speak. "Softear says that the sickness is normal, but I may have lost them. I-I didn't mate

with a tom I swear and I-" Sparkheart cut her off as she hurried forward and pulled her into an embrace.

"I-I can't believe it!" She murmured into Skytail's neck fur, sounding awed. "This is great!" She pulled away and stared at Skytail. "We'll have to move you into the nursery right away! I'll tell Brackenmist and Redstar and they'll have you taken off your duties right away!" She scurried away, leaving Skytail stunned into silence.

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"This is the third time, Redstar!" Bluefeather's outraged yowl cut through Skytail's dream and she opened her eyes. An entire moon had passed since Softear had told Skytail she was expecting kits and Skytail couldn't wait to have the kits out of her and into the world of WindClan. She got to her feet, clumsily tripping over her own paws, before poking her head out of the nursery entrance. Snow covered the camp, forcing the moor runners to stay in their dens while the tunnelers dug them out.

Redstar's tabby tail lashed from side to side. "You *saw* Copperstar hunting a rabbit on the moor with his warriors?" He growled. The tabby leader had grown thin since the start of leafbare, and his ribs poked from his sleek fur like twigs and roots. Skytail moved closer, wary of her rounded sides, and pricked her ears.

Wispwren nodded, her face twisted into an angry scowl. "It was Copperstar, Waspheart, Foxwhisker, and Silverfrost." She reported and slid out her claws, piercing the fresh layer of snow. "They caught two rabbits that should've been given to our elders and kits."

Skytail glanced at Bluefeather, trying to read her friend's emotions based on her facial expression and her eyes. She was shocked when she found she couldn't read her friend at all and she looked hesitantly at Redstar.

The Clan leader drew in a deep breath and squared his shoulders. "We'll send out extra patrols to the ThunderClan border and keep an eye on them," he meowed finally. Skytail noticed Wispwren's eyes sharpening and Bluefeather narrowing her eyes. "We can't rush into battle when we have elders and kits to take care of." He turned to

Brackenmist, who was barely visible as he had snow clinging tightly to his pelt. "I want more hunting patrols being sent out, more tunnelers need to find more prey."

Skytail felt a pang of sympathy for the older leader. *He's carrying the weight of the entire Clan on his shoulders.* She thought, a rush of fresh respect filling her. *He's responsible for keeping the Clan together, and how he does that is a mystery to me.* She heard commotion and looked to her left to see Sappaw and Heatherpaw chasing each other. She felt a pang of sadness as she watched her former apprentice leap into the snow and burst out, showering Heatherpaw with white flakes. Since being moved into the nursery, Sappaw's training was picked up by Parsleyfrost. Skytail was a bit sad that she could no longer continue her warrior duties and train her apprentice, but she was thankful that Parsleyfrost was the one to keep Sappaw going.

"Hey, Skytail!" Featherpaw's call made the queen blink and she looked over to see Featherpaw, Martenpaw, Sparkheart, and Cherrypaw heading towards her. A skinny rabbit was in the jaws of Martenpaw, and Skytail gazed hungrily at the piece of fresh-kill. "Are you hungry?"

Skytail licked her lips. "Starving," she responded and touched noses with Sparkheart. "How are you, my little spark?" She teased.

Sparkheart rolled her eyes and pushed her toward the nursery. "You should be inside and keeping warm." She scolded gently. "You'll wear yourself out in all this snow."

"I've moldered in the den for the last moon!" Skytail protested as they slid into the nursery. She shook snowflakes from her fur, careful not to spray Woolcloud's new kits, and headed back toward her nest. "I deserve *some* freedom."

From her nest of soft grass, rabbit fur, and downy feathers, Woolcloud let out an airy laugh. Her belly was much fatter than Skytail's, as she was now suckling Swiftkit, Berrykit, Snipkit, and Beetlekit. They'd been born only three sunrises before, and they had yet to open their eyes or ears, which wouldn't happen for a few more sunrises. "When you're nursing little ones, you don't have the

freedom you would as a warrior." Her eyes were warm as she gazed down at her four kits, who were snuggled at her belly as they slept.

A lump of anxiety and fear grew in Skytail's throat as she settled down in her nest, easing her rounded sides to one side as she looked up at her mate. "Am I able to eat now?" She teased, her belly rumbling as she remembered the rabbit.

Sparkheart opened her mouth to respond, when a shout filled the air, making Skytail's fur stand on end.

"Sparkheart!" It sounded like Bluefeather. Staggering to her paws, Skytail followed her mate out of the nursery and into the snowy clearing once more. Sure enough, the dark gray she-cat was pacing the camp, her fur bristling into spikes. "Redstar has ordered us to patrol the ThunderClan border. Get Rabbitspring and Quailfeather. We leave as soon as possible."

Sparkheart looked slightly annoyed at being bossed around by Bluefeather but she dipped her head and padded through the snow toward the warrior's den.

Skytail watched her mate go and turned to Bluefeather. She winced as she saw a pit of no emotions in her blue gaze. "How've you been?" She asked, hoping to spark some sort of conversation with her friend. The sourness of their last interactions burned in her mind and she pushed them away. "Good hunting?"

Bluefeather looked at Skytail, her eyes shards of nothing. "Yeah, sure," she meowed, sounding distracted. Silence fell on them like snow, and Skytail shifted her paws uncomfortably. "I heard you were expecting kits," she meowed suddenly. "Congratulations."

"Thanks," Skytail nearly winced at the hesitation in her voice and she shook the snow from her fur. "I'm going back into the nursery. I'll see you later?" Bluefeather nodded quietly, and Skytail turned to head back to the den. *Something's wrong,* she thought as she stole a glance at the moor runner. *Even though I know she won't admit it, something's bothering her.*

Chapter 22

"You're doing great, Skytail," purred Softear as the medicine cat ran her paws along the queen's belly. "One more."

"It's a she-cat!" Exclaimed Woolcloud. The queen looked excitedly at Shadepaw, who was lapping at the wet pelt of a red calico tom-kit at his paws. "Skytail, you have a daughter and a son!"

Skytail couldn't muster the strength to speak or lift her head. She lay sprawled in her nest in the nursery, panting as the wave of pain slowly ebbed away, leaving her weak and breathless. The rabbit leg-bone that lay between her paws had teeth marks on it where Skytail had bitten down to conceal the yowl of pain that filled her throat. *Make it stop!* She silently pleaded, not knowing who or what she was telling to.

Softear prodded her cheek with a forepaw as her eyelids slid shut. "Stay awake," she ordered sharply. "Your kits want to meet their mother, but only when this last one arrives."

Gathering all the strength in her bones, the final kit thumped into the nest by the base of Skytail's tail. She gripped the bone between her jaws and bit down hard until the pain passed and she went limp in her nest, breathing hard. Something wet and furry was pressed against her cheek and she opened her eyes and took a deep breath. The scent of damp fur, milk, and old memories filled her nose and mind. Her heart throbbed as she propped herself up and gazed at her kit, her paws tingling with awe.

It was a pinkish-gray tabby tom with darker stripes and big, rounded ears. Gingerly, Skytail licked at the tom's pelt and he let out a small, shrill squeal. Warmth and love filled her heart until she thought it would burst. Two more bundles were placed beside the tom, a red-and-white she-cat with pointed ears, and a red calico tom.

"Two sons and a daughter," reported Softear as she looked

approvingly at Skytail. Something flickered in her green eyes, but it was quickly diminished. "You have a lovely litter of three. They're all healthy, even if they were born a bit early."

Shadepaw padded over and looked at the kits. Skytail had forgotten all about the medicine cat apprentice. They hadn't spoken at all since she'd been accepted into the Clan, and she felt a bit bad. "We'll bring you some wet moss and herbs later," he meowed, sounding upset and awkward.

"Thank you," she purred, her throat scratchy. "You'll be a great medicine cat one day, Shadepaw." She added with a glance at his mentor.

Softear nodded in agreement and nudged her apprentice. "I was planning on making you a full medicine cat next half-moon," she meowed casually.

Shadepaw glanced up in alarm at his mentor, jaws parted to protest. "B-but I haven't learned everything yet! I need more time!" His amber eyes were round with shock and dismay as he stared at Softear.

Softear's green gaze was gentle as she gazed at her apprentice and she touched her tail to his shoulder. Her eyes glowed with pride and she chuckled. "You have trained by my side for many, many moons. You have endured a lot and it would be an honor to give you your full name."

Shadepaw dipped his head low, eyes sparkling with excitement. "Th-thank you, Softear." He meowed in a rapid undertone that dripped with joy. "You are a great mentor."

Looking pleased with herself and her apprentice, Softear looked at Skytail. "We'll be back in shortly to check on you and your kits," she meowed proudly. She dipped her head to the queen and her and Shadepaw ducked out of the den. Skytail's ears pricked up as she heard the medicine cat talking to another cat and a few heartbeats later, Sparkheart came trotting into the den nervously.

"Are you okay?" She whispered, her voice barely audible. "Are the

kits-" Glancing down, Sparkheart's eyes rounded until Skytail couldn't see the whites and she broke into a loud, rumbling purr that could've shaken the ground. "Oh, they're perfect." She murmured and approached slowly, one eye on Skytail as though asking for silent permission.

Skytail nodded and pulled her tail away to reveal the three tiny bodies snuggled at the curve of her belly. Sparkheart breathed in and looked proudly at Skytail. "There's two toms and a she-kit," the queen meowed, blinking slowly. She still couldn't believe that she'd had kits, let alone with a she-cat. *Thank you,* she silently thought.

"They're beautiful," the red tabby warrior padded around her mate and curled around her and the new kits. "What will we name them?" She murmured in Skytail's ear, ruffling her fur.

Leaning her head against her mate's chest, Skytail thought for a moment before looking at the kits. "I was thinking Petalkit for the she-cat," she meowed quietly, looking at Sparkheart for approval.

Her mate's eyes shone with love and she nodded. "We can name them whatever you want," she meowed and touched the calico tom-kit lightly with her tail tip. "How does Dapplekit sound for him?" She suggested.

Skytail nodded. Looking at her final kit- the biggest of his littermates- she purred. "This one will be Thriftkit." She decided and rested her chin on her front paws, staring in awe at her kits as Sparkheart curled her tail around them. "For as long as I am alive," she whispered to the kits. "No cat will ever harm you."

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"Come on, Dapplekit!" Called Petalkit as she waited impatiently at the nursery entrance. "I wanna play in the snow!" Her blue eyes shone with excitement as she twitched the tip of her pointed tail, which was split into two small spikes.

"Mom!" Complained the calico tom as Skytail licked his back, dislodging a clump of rabbit fur that clung to his fluffy fur. He wriggled in Skytail's grip, managing to squeeze free and join his

sister.

Petalkit gazed at Skytail, who watched them with amusement. "Can we go?" She demanded, stamping her paw with impatience.

Skytail heaved herself to her paws and- Thriftkit at her heels- pulled herself out of her nest and headed for her son and daughter. "You can, but you have to stay close." She warned, her tail twitching at Petalkit as she rolled her eyes.

"Fine, fine," she meowed, waving a paw. There was an excited squeak and Skytail looked over to see Woolcloud's kits playing in the snow. Petalkit's ears pricked and her tail lifted into the air as Beetlekit and Snipkit leaped into the snow, Swiftkit and Berrykit hot on their tails.

"Come on, Petalkit!" Cheered Swiftkit as he sprang toward the red she-kit. Snow clung to his fur and Skytail gulped. They weren't that much older, but they seemed so much stronger than Skytail's kits. Protectively, she curled her tail around her babies.

Behind him, Berrykit leaped onto his back, thrusting him into the snow with her paws on his head. "Gotcha!" She squeaked and looked proudly at Skytail, who nodded approvingly.

In a flash, Berrykit was thrown into the snow as Rowan and Carrot- now Rowankit and Carrotkit- charged from where they hid under a clump of gorse. With shouts of joy, the two brothers chased Swiftkit and Berrykit to the Fallen Tree, where Redstar sat and watched with amusement.

Skytail lifted her gaze to the leader, who met her gaze and nodded. Sighing, she nudged her three kits forward and watched as they started playing with their denmates. In the quarter-moon since they had been born, Skytail was shocked at how much they grew and how different their personalities were.

Petalkit was the second oldest, but that didn't stop her from getting her brothers and herself into trouble. Once, they'd snuck out of the nursery at night and invaded Softear and Shadeheart's den, eating and wrecking the den. Thankfully, they had eaten herbs that were

harmless and were fine the next morning. Along with being a troublemaker, Petalkit was the leader of her brothers and would take them on adventures around the nursery and organizing little attacks on the other older kits in the den.

Dapplekit, although being the biggest of the three, was the most kind-hearted and soft kit Skytail ever met. He was timid at first, but once Skytail told him no foxes or owls would take him away, he got used to being around so many cats and even made friends with Mallowkit, Amberkit, and Nightkit; Fawndust's kits.

Thriftkit, on the other paw, was a bit like Morningshine, Sparkheart's mother. The tom was very quiet, which scared Skytail as she thought he was mute. When he started talking, Skytail had never felt relief as great as when he spoke. Not only was he quieter than his siblings, he didn't want his littermates to get into trouble. Skytail respected his awareness that surpassed his young age.

"Ha!" Skytail pricked her ears and looked over at the kits just as Rowankit threw Petalkit into the snow and she heard her daughter let out a shriek.

"Petalkit!" She hurried over and pushed Rowankit off her daughter with a paw, hissing. "Get off her, you'll hurt her!" Rowankit took a step back, ears flat and tail down. "She's smaller than you, you rabbit-brain!" She curled her lip, fury filling her. At the sight of Carrotkit's wide eyes as he joined his littermate, she flattened her fur and sighed, whisking Petalkit to her paws with her tail. "Thriftkit, Dapplekit, let's go."

"But I wanna keep playing!" Whined Petalkit as she was pushed toward the nursery by Skytail's muzzle. "We were having fun!"

Skytail twitched one ear and gave her daughter a hard stare. "No arguments, Petalkit." She meowed sternly and with a glance over her shoulder at Rowankit and Carrotkit, she slipped into the nursery with her kits.

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"From this moment on, until you have earned your warrior names,

you will be known as Mallowpaw, Amberpaw, and Nightpaw." Redstar meowed from the Fallen Tree, nodding to the new apprentices. "At the request from your mother and father, Hawkpool will be Mallowpaw's mentor, Fernpelt will be Amberpaw's mentor, and Wolfleaf will be Nightpaw's mentor."

From where they sat outside the nursery, Skytail watched her brother and his mate purr loudly, watching their kits beam with pride and excitement as their mentors moved forward to greet them. Her own kits, who were watching the ceremony behind her, squealed.

"They'll be smelly tunnelers!" Remarked Petalkit, sticking her nose into the air with a sniff. She looked at Thriftkit, who was watching quietly with his tail wrapped neatly around his front paws. "I wouldn't want to be stuck in the dark tunnels all day! I'd rather face a den full of rabid foxes!"

There was a growl from Skytail's right as Driftbird turned to glare at the kit. "It's an honor to be a tunneler," she retorted hotly. "Show some decency and keep your thoughts to yourself." Turning to Skytail, she added. "They might be young, but they should know respect." She meowed sternly and turned back to the ceremony.

"Sorry, Driftbird," Skytail apologized and looked at her daughter, burning with embarrassment. "Petalkit, tunnelers are your Clanmates and are the reason we're doing so well in leafbare. They dig the tunnels to find prey and to keep our dens from being too crowded." As she spoke, Petalkit's eyes shone with defiance, but she didn't protest. "Would you rather have the tunnelers keeping us fed and not crowded, or starve and sleep in a cramped den?"

Petalkit scuffed her paws in the snow, looking ashamed. "I guess they aren't so bad," she mumbled. Skytail heard Driftbird snort, but the tunneler said nothing more as Redstar bowed his head. A prickle of unease ran through her at the sight of his ragged pelt, which was usually so well-kept and neatly groomed. Now, it slid on his pelt like water on a fish's scales. *He's trying to look strong for the Clan,* she thought as the tom leaped down from the Fallen Tree and stumbled, but kept his balance. Once the ceremony was over, Skytail shooed the kits into the nursery and scanned the

disappearing crowd for Sparkheart. She hadn't seen the kits yet, and Skytail wanted to spend some time with her mate before she was inevitably pulled away on a patrol.

Gazing around the camp, Skytail didn't find her mate. Instead, she found Bluefeather chatting with Sappaw and Saplingpaw. Her eyes slightly narrowed as she saw her former apprentice flirting with the older warrior, and expected to watch Bluefeather reprimand him. Instead, she laughed and it only encouraged Sappaw's actions as he scooted closer to her as she looked at Saplingpaw.

Something burned beneath her fur as she forced herself to tear her gaze away. Pricking her ears, she padded toward Brackenmist, who was talking with Ravenstem and Lakespots. *Maybe he knows where Sparkheart went.*

"Brackenmist?" She mewed, coming up behind him.

The tabby tom jumped and turned, gazing at her for a heartbeat before he flattened his fur. "Skytail," he breathed, shaking out his pelt. "What can I do for you?"

Skytail dipped her head to apologize for startling him. "I was looking for Sparkheart. Have you seen her? The kits want to see her." She caught Ravenstem's disapproving stare and glared at him, forcing him to drop his gaze to his paws and move off with Lakespots talking at his side.

Brackenmist flicked his tail and nodded. "I sent her, Wispwren, Quailfeather, and Cherrypaw to the SkyClan border." His eyes narrowed slightly. "And they haven't returned yet. I sent them out before Bluefeather's patrol, and they've gotten back before Wispwren's." Getting to his feet, he called out to Bluefeather. "Bluefeather! Get Morningshine and Lakespots. We're going to look for Wispwren's patrol."

Bluefeather groaned and pushed herself to her paws. "But they're probably coming back right now," she argued. "We don't need to looked for them when they could be coming back."

Skytail turned to her friend, her eyes narrowed. "You don't know

that," she snapped, and Bluefeather's gaze locked with hers. "For all we know, they could've been ambushed by a SkyClan patrol! Do you want the same thing that happened to Breezeblaze happen to them? What kind of Clan loyalty is that?"

The dark she-cat stiffened with rage and her fur bristled along her back. Sappaw looked nervously between the two, as though deciding which cat to stand beside. "You little-"

"That's enough." Commanded Brackenmist as he stepped between the two bristling warriors, sending warning glances at both of them. "Bluefeather, we have to see if they're alright. If they're going to walk into the camp right as we leave, a cat will send for us and bring us back. It's worth it to waste time looking for our Clanmates and make sure they're okay." Skytail clamped her jaws shut as the deputy looked at her. "Let's go. Now."

"Wow," Skytail nearly jumped out of her skin as Myrtlestorm padded up beside her as the chosen cats padded out of the camp, Brackenmist in the lead. "You must be one of his favorites in the Clan." She teased, giving Skytail a short glance.

Skytail snorted and shook her head. "He's just trying to temper Bluefeather's fragile ego."

Myrtlestorm looked at her. "Her fragile ego?" She echoed with a shake of her marbled tabby head. "We're talking about Bluefeather, not you, right?" Skytail narrowed her eyes and the tabby she-cat shrugged. "Sure, Bluefeather is rough around the edges now that you and Sparkheart have had kits, but you've been on-edge recently. Is everything okay? You're very distant."

A sudden wave of guilt washed over Skytail as she took in the younger she-cat's words. *She's right,* she thought and dipped her head. "I'll be fine once the kits are out of the nursery and begin their training." She mewed, keeping her tone light-hearted. With a teasing sneer, she added. "Do you have any eyes on a mate yet? You're quite the looker for the toms."

Myrtlestorm swiped a paw at Skytail's muzzle, eyes flashing. "Oh, please," she scoffed humorously. "Just because I'm a warrior, doesn't

mean I should be like you." She poked Skytail's chest with a silver paw, and the two shared a laugh. "But as of late, Brownfern and I have grown quite close and we've been training our apprentices together a lot."

Skytail felt a flash of alarm as she realized she'd forgotten Featherpaw was Brownfern's mentor. Guilt replaced the alarm as she forgot all about apologizing to the brown tabby tom for attacking him. "How are Weaselpaw and Featherpaw doing with their training?"

"Weaselpaw is being a bit of a spit-fire, but she's learning quickly." Myrtlestorm purred with amusement. "She keeps thinking that she can run faster than a rabbit, but she barely keeps up." Skytail purred as the warrior went on. "As for Featherpaw, Brownfern says she's loving being an apprentice. She does her duties- to a degree- and often takes prey to the elders to hear stories." The blue tabby she-cat touched her tail tip to Skytail's shoulder, her eyes gleaming. "Your daughter is a good apprentice." She complimented.

Skytail felt her pelt burn. "Thanks," she mewed, pleased at how well her daughter's training was going. She was about to say more when a warning yowl from the camp entrance alerted both she-cats and they turned to see Sparkheart racing into the camp.

"Some cat get Softear and Shadeheart!" Cried the warrior, her eyes wide with distress and stormy with rage. "Help! Brackenmist is hurt!"

Thorns pierced her heart as Skytail saw the rest of both patrols stumble into the camp. Wounds laced her Clanmates, blood staining the ground as the rest of the cats filed in. Sparkheart bled from a wound on her chest and foreleg that was sure to sting like fire. Wispwren's ear was badly torn and her fur was splattered with blood that thankfully didn't appear to be hers. Brackenmist was splayed across Bluefeather's shoulders, lifeless and blood dripping from his head.

"Brackenmist! No!" Redstar's shocked screech split the air as the red-and-white tabby leader bolted from his den and skidded to a halt in

the clearing. His yellow eyes were wide with horror as he speechlessly looked at Sparkheart.

"We were ambushed by a SkyClan patrol claiming that we stole prey," the tabby she-cat reported. She unsheathed her broken and bloody claws and dug them into the cold grass. "Splashbrook led it with Sandleaf, Cloudbreeze, Hickorytooth, and Redberry. Cloudbreeze got help and we were outnumbered until Brackenmist showed up." She sent the lifeless deputy a glance as Softear and Shadeheart looked him over. "We sent them packing with a few good scratches to remember us by."

"Redstar," meowed the voice of Softear as the medicine cat turned to the leader, her eyes sullen. She shook her head, and Skytail dropped her head in sorrow. *Another deputy, a friend, a father, gone.*

"N-no..." Redstar whispered. His legs shook until they gave out and he fell to the ground, staring at his paws. Morningshine crossed the camp and nosed him to his paws, her eyes unreadable. She whispered something in his ear and he raised his head, clearing his throat. "With Brackenmist's death, we are without a deputy." His voice trembled with grief and Skytail straightened. Something burned in her heart at the mention of the tom's position and she looked at Myrtlestorm, who looked troubled and angry. "I saw these words before the body of Brackenmist, so his spirit may hear and approve of my choice. Bluefeather will be the new deputy of WindClan."

The camp was silent as Bluefeather padded deliberately in the center of the clearing and raised her voice. "Brackenmist was my mentor," she began, her voice serious. "And I will always remember him as the calm and collected warrior he was. If I can be half the deputy he was, that will be a success to me."

Skytail watched as her friend lifted her head proudly as the Clan started cheering her name. She blocked out the cheers, even as Myrtlestorm yowled beside her. When Bluefeather locked gazes with her, Skytail stiffened at the sight of unfaltered smug and pride in their blue depths as though she were planning to be deputy all along and that Brackenmist was just an object in her way.

Chapter 23

Skytail shook drops of water from her fur and breathed a deep sigh of relief that the moor was returning to normal with the end of leafbare. After the long, sickly season, WindClan had lost many of its cats. Redstar lost a life, making him be on his last life from greencough. They'd lost both Whiskertail and Robinfoot in two days from the harsh weather. The most heartbreaking of the loss, Finchsong lost her daughter, Dapplekit, to greencough after she visited the elder's den. It was hard to cheer up the other kits since their denmate's death, and Skytail had grown fearful that she'd lose her kits to the sickness.

The death of two elders and one kit wasn't the only thing that happened during leafbare. Sappaw and Saplingpaw were made into full warriors days after the warm weather started returning to the lake.

"They've struggled through the hardest season with us like true WindClan warriors," Redstar had announced to the Clan after the long and cold vigil for little Dapplekit. "I believe they deserve their warrior names. From this moment on, you two will be known as Sapfoot and Saplingstorm. StarClan honors your strength and bravery in the face of the harshest season and we welcome you as full warriors of WindClan."

Skytail was thankful that Sapfoot was finally a warrior, but couldn't help feeling nervous that Redstar was now on his final life, and desperately wished he hadn't lost another life in the cold season. *He'd outlive all of us if he wanted to,* she thought as she shook out her fur and headed for the camp entrance. Since her kits were long weaned off her milk and preferred prey, she was able to leave the camp to hunt, but not patrol so she wasn't attacked.

"I'm sure there's something juicy over by the ThunderClan border," Bluefeather had said before she left the camp. "Cloversong, Shellpaw, Twigflower, and Eagleheart will go with you. Can't have a defenseless queen being attacked with kits in the nursery."

Skytail had wanted to shred her friend's ears and show her that she could take care of herself and wasn't defenseless, but she knew she'd only get in trouble if she tried. She begrudgingly let the other cats tag along, and ended up talking more with Twigflower and Eagleheart while Cloversong showed Shellpaw where to hunt and tested his sighting abilities on a small incline.

"Have you heard about Twigflower and Muddythorn?" Eagleheart gossiped in Skytail's ear, snapping her back to the present. Twigflower had gone after a rabbit that was hiding in a small dip in the moorland, leaving the two waiting while Cloversong and Shellpaw went after a lapwing not far away.

Skytail shook her head. She didn't care much about Clan gossip, but she was interested in what the two younger cats were up to. "What happened?" She asked, looking around and scanning the hills for intruders who might pick a fight.

Eagleheart sent a glance over his shoulder, as though making sure the white-eared moor runner was coming up behind him to listen. "I heard Twigflower is expecting his kits already, but hasn't moved into the nursery yet." He whispered.

She noticed his eyes gleaming with excitement and raised an eyebrow. "I see you're excited about gossip," she teased, flicking her tail under his chin. "So what if she's expecting kits? It'll be good for the Clan to have new life."

The stocky gray tabby tom rolled his eyes. "But they'll be my *sister's* kits!" He boasted, puffing out his chest fur with his eyes shining. "It'l be great! Imagine little Muddythorn's and little Twigflower's scampering around underpaw! It'll be fun!"

Skytail rolled her eyes and shook her head, amused. *If Muddythorn isn't this happy for he and Twigflower's kits, I will be surprised.* A shout from over the rise where Cloversong and Shellpaw had vanished startled Skytail and she looked at Eagleheart, who looked confused.

"It's ThunderClan!" The tom's fur bristled up instantly and he called to Twigflower over his shoulder before heading for the slope. "Come on! They could be in danger!"

Bounding after him, Skytail broke into a sprint and ran ahead, leaping over the top of the hill and stood, panting as she looked down. From where she stood on the hill, she could see two figures- Cloversong and Shellpaw- facing six or seven other figures that were circling them like owls. *ThunderClan has them surrounded.* With a burst of anger for the forest cats, Skytail pelted down the incline, yowling a warning.

Cloversong, who had been shielding her apprentice from the blood-hungry ThunderClan warriors, looked up at her shout and was taken by surprise as Waspheart leaped at her and raked her face with his claws.

With a screech of fury, Skytail ran through the stunned ThunderClan cats and sprang for Waspheart, claws extended. She crashed into the deputy, sending them both flipping and rolling as she threw him to the ground, her paws smashing against his chest and keeping him down. Lunging down, she sank her teeth into his throat as his claws lashed at her shoulder viciously.

Waspheart snarled, his face twisted with rage as blood filled her mouth. He twitched and convulsed, before he grew still beneath her paws and let out a breath before staring sightlessly at the sky. Skytail raised her head, stunned at her actions, but turned to hiss threateningly at the other ThunderClan cats. Blood dripped from her chin, spattering the ground as she watched Eagleheart pounce on the back of Foxwhisker, who screeched with surprise. At once, the cats around Shellpaw and Cloversong became a mass of screeching and lashing tails.

Skytail joined Twigflower in taking down Ravenface, who was trying to nip at Twigflower's heels. Both she-cats rained blow after blow on the tom's head, before switching strategies and going for his chest and belly when there were open areas to be attacked.

There was a shriek of pure horror and Skytail twisted her head around to see Shellpaw standing as he watched his mentor's throat being slashed open by Spiderthorn, who turned his attention to the apprentice and advanced quickly. Shellpaw didn't move as the ThunderClan warrior knocked him onto his side with a hefty cuff of a slender paw and the apprentice looked even smaller compared to

the taller warrior.

Abandoning Twigflower to deal with Ravenface, Skytail charged for the pale yellow tabby warrior. She was aware of Eagleheart falling in beside her, and she quickly decided to let the other warrior handle Spiderthorn while she checked on Shellpaw and Cloversong. As Eagleheart flung himself at Spiderthorn, Skytail skidded to a halt beside Shellpaw and looked at Cloversong. The black-and-white she-cat didn't move when Skytail nudged her, and her flank didn't rise or fall with breath. Disbelief and grief wracked her heart as she tore her gaze away from the dead she-cat to look at the apprentice.

Shellpaw seemed dazed and he swayed on his paws. "She-she can't be gone," he choked out, his voice a rasping whisper. He stared glossy-eyed at Skytail, trembling. "W-wake her up!"

"I can't, Shelly," Skytail meowed softly. Her heart tore with sympathy and empathy for the young apprentice. She knew what it felt like to lose a mentor. Even after becoming a warrior, the pain of losing Darkfeather ripped at her heart. "She's with Brackenmist and Darkfeather, now."

"N-no!" Shellpaw stumbled toward his mentor, pressing his paws against her sodden fur, sticky with blood and shook her. "Get up, Cloversong! It-it's me, Shellpaw!"

Tearing her gaze from the grieving tom, Skytail saw Twigflower driving Ravenface, snapping at his heels as he leaped over the stream and vanished into the trees. Spiderthorn quickly followed with Eagleheart snarling after him.

"Eagleheart!" Skytail called to the furious warrior. The tom turned, eyes burning with anger. "Get Cloversong back to the camp and tell Softear and Shadeheart we need more herbs."

"What about you?" Twigflower limped up beside her.

Skytail looked over at Shellpaw, who wept into Cloversong's bloody pelt. She sighed. "I'll talk with Shellpaw."

The younger she-cat seemed to understand as she rose to her paws

and helped heave Cloversong onto Eagleheart's shoulders.

Shellpaw tore at his mentor's fur with his claws, crying. "No! No! No!" He wailed, throwing his head back. "She shouldn't have died! This is all my fault! My fault!"

Skytail padded up beside him as the two warriors carried Cloversong away and brushed the tears from his cheek with a forepaw. "Shellpaw," she prompted softly. The apprentice didn't seem to hear her. "We all lose those special to us, even when times are easy. But they do not leave us. They join StarClan, where they reunite with old friends and kin." She tipped her head to peer at the cloudless blue sky. "Cloversong is probably up there bickering with Brackenmist as we speak."

"She shouldn't be up there," growled Shellpaw as he dug his claws into the grass. The bitterness in his mew startled Skytail, but she nodded mutely. "She should be down here, celebrating our victory over those ThunderClan scum." He turned his gaze to the sky. "StarClan has been so cruel to us, why take another cat?"

Skytail blinked, surprised. "I do not know the ways of StarClan," she meowed carefully. "But I do know that when you pass onto their ranks among the stars, you'll see her again."

***

"Cloversong's death has sparked anger within Redstar." Meowed Twigflower as Skytail came from the apprentice's den. She left the other apprentices tend to Shellpaw's horrors, and met up with the tall moor runner outisde. "He wants to attack them, but Softear advised him not to."

"What about Eagleheart and yourself?" Skytail asked, remembering the harsh wounds both cats suffered during the battle. Waspheart had wounded her shoulder, but it would heal in due time. "Are you both okay?"

Twigflower nodded. "I'll be fine, but Eagleheart wants revenge." She buried her claws into the grass and curled her lip. "Not that I blame

him. Who attacks a young apprentice and his mentor when they're already bady outnumbered?"

Skytail nodded in grim agreement. "Only ThunderClan can be so ferocious and hateful in battle." She recalled the hatred in Waspheart's venomous green eyes as he died, and she shivered. She shook her head as if to clear it. "It would make sense that Redstar got upset about his daughter's unjust killing. Copperstar needs to control his warriors before more cats die or get hurt."

The pale-gray warrior looked unconvinced. "When he does that, hedgehogs will fly." She muttered and stretched, wincing. "Softear says I need to rest my muscles. I must've pulled something in the fight. I'll see you later, Skytail." Before she padded away, Skytail remembered the conversation with Eagleheart before Cloversong's death.

"Are you expecting Muddythorn's kits?" She blurted.

Twigflower looked Skytail over and nodded. "My brother as a loose tongue, that's for sure." She purred dryly. "I don't think I can take many more beatings before these kits are born."

Skytail blinked. "May StarClan light your path, and the paths of your kits, always." She mewed. She meant it. Despite never believing in the Clans' ancestry, she felt a sense of peace and calm wash over her at her own words.

***

"We can't just do nothing!" Bluefeather argued as Skytail returned to the Clan with Shellpaw sulking at her side. The Clan deputy was facing the leader, her pelt bristling with indignation and fury. "They've killed *another* of our warriors, Redstar! You're daughter! Surely you want vengeance!"

Redstar's tail lashed from side to side, eyes narrowed into fierce slits as he gazed at his deputy. "Cloversong died saving her apprentice," he retorted angrily. "Sending more cats into a needless battle will only kill more of our warriors. Do you want that?"

Bluefeather arched her back, hissing at her Clan leader. "What kind of Clan leader are you?" She spat challengingly at him. Skytail felt the fur on her back and neck bristle as she saw Redstar stiffen beneath his pelt. "Your daughter is dead and Shellpaw is traumatized! What leader are you if you do not fight for your Clan!"

Skytail watched as Redstar unsheathed his claws and hurried to step between the two cats. With her eyes narrowed at the deputy, she meowed evenly. "I saw what happened with the ThunderClan cats," she interrupted. "Waspheart had them both surrounded. Now, he's dead, and so is Cloversong. Should we let more of our cats die, or wait for them to grow stronger?"

The dark-furred deputy blinked at her before she curled her lip in a sneer. "Of course *you'd* turn down a fight," she growled and Skytail's ears twisted agaisnt her head at her words. "You'd *always* recoil against the thought of battle!"

"That's not true!" Spat Eagleheart as he stood tall beside Twigflower, who was talking quietly to Shellpaw. The apprentice still looked shaken, but he glared resentfully at Bluefeather, anger bright in his gaze. "It was Skytail who saved Cloversong and Shellpaw from being ripped to shreds by killing Waspheart!"

Redstar gasped and Skytail looked over her shoulder, forgetting that the news hadn't been relayed to the leader about the ThunderClan deputy's death. "You killed another cat?" He sounded outraged, and Skytail dipped her head, ready for a punishment. "You did what you had to do to save your Clanmates." He said instead. "For that, I thank you."

"*What*?" Bluefeather's voice was a shrill screech of pure rage. "She *killed* in battle, Redstar! That's against the warrior code! You can't let her get away with that!"

"*I* am WindClan's leader, and it is *my* choice what happens to my warriors." The leader snapped harshly and Bluefeather bared her teeth, snarling. "Skytail has proven herself a strong and worthy opponent in battle, and she protects her Clan, even if it results in the death of her enemy." He turned his yellow gaze on the moor runner, who swayed on her paws. "For that, you have my respect."

"She's killed in battle before!" Bluefeather sounded like she was grasping at anything to get dim Redstar's mood, and Skytail dug her claws into the grass. "Surely that has to account for something that hints she is a bad warrior?"

"If anything," Redstar countered, "this hints at *you* being a bad warrior." Bluefeather gasped, but the leader went on. "Skytail is the model of what a great warrior should be. *You* always yearn for a fight, picking them with your Clanmates." He turned and bounded toward the Fallen Tree, perching on top as the Clan watched, stunned into silence. "From this moment on, Bluefeather will no longer be the deputy of WindClan!" He yowled. "Skytail is the new deputy of WindClan in her place!"

"You can't do this to me!" Bluefeather shrieked, her eyes wide and wild as she stared in dismay at Redstar. "I'm the deputy of WindClan! Not her!" She turned her toxic gaze onto Skytail, who braced herself. "She's an outsider! She's not wild-born! *I* have a true warrior's blood!"

"Silence!" Redstar shouted and Bluefeather crouched, her belly fur brushing the ground. "Skytail is the new deputy, Bluefeather, as you have proven to be a stickler for throwing us into needless battles without reason. You are unfit to be deputy, *or* be the future leader of this Clan."

Bluefeather let out a battle cry and leaped at Redstar, knocking him off the Fallen Tree with a thunderous caterwaul. Skytail gasped as the pair morphed into a writhing ball of screeching and lashing paws. She shook her head and bounded forward, leaping at Bluefeather. Her paws crashed into Bluefeather's shoulder, throwing her clear off Redstar and letting him scramble back, eyes wide and blood beading at the tip of one ear.

Tangling her claws into her opponents soft fur, Skytail felt the ground hit her back and she let out a wheeze, the breath knocked from her chest. Pressing her hind paws against her friend's belly, Skytail kicked her away and pushed herself to her feet, legs trembling.

Raising a paw, Bluefeather wiped a smear of blood off her mouth

and glared at Skytail. "You always were the Clan favorite," she hissed menacingly, and Skytail stiffened. "Even when you were a 'paw, *everyone* liked you more than *me*." The warrior lashed her tail in anger and Skytail narrowed her blue eyes. "*I* brought you to the Clan. It's because of *me* that you're even in the Clan!" She lunged, and Skytail dodged to the right. Pain flashed through her side as claws slashed her shoulder and she spun around to see Bluefeather leaping at her back.

Skytail felt claws dig into her spine and she fell to the ground with a yelp. She twisted, and stared up as Bluefeather glowered down at her, eyes narrowed into hateful blue slits. Fear sliced through her as she kicked upward with all four paws and shoved Bluefeather back, staggering to stay on her feet. "L-leave!" She gasped, head reeling. She never thought she'd have to defend herself from her best friend! "I don't want to fight you, Bluefeather!"

The dark gray she-cat stumbled back, her eyes fixed on her enemy. Skytail held her breath. "You've always gotten what you wanted!" She yelled, and Skytail flinched at the dripping hatred in her voice. "You have the perfect family!"

"Darkfeather wouldn't want us fighting like this, Bluefeather!" Skytail mewed desperately, taking a step toward the she-cat. "Think of your mother and father!"

"Who do you think killed Breezeblaze?" Bluefeather's eyes glittered with anger and a wildness that startled Skytail. "Because of me, that useless piece of dung won't bother me anymore! I did the whole Clan a favor by getting rid of him!"

Skytail felt her tail bush out as she pictured Breezeblaze on SkyClan's territory, his throat ripped out and flies buzzing around him. She felt sick with horror as she stared speechlessly at her friend.

There was movement as Redstar scrambled to his paws and glared at Bluefeather, who breathed hard. Her anger not yet spent. "Get out of WindClan, Bluefeather!" He screeched, his claws ripping up the grass beneath him. "You are no longer welcome here!"

Bluefeather turned her burning blue gaze to the red-and-white tabby leader, her eyes burning like blue fire. "I was *never* welcome here!" She spat back at him. Her head twisted and her gaze rested on Sapfoot, who sat with Saplingstorm and Brownfern. "Let's go, Sapfoot. These hare-brains are no place for *real* warriors."

Sapfoot looked hesitant before he stepped toward the she-cat, his ears flicking nervously. Turning to Skytail, he spoke, his voice rattling. "Bluefeather was right about you," he said. He almost sounded apologetic as he gazed at his former mentor. "You have no right to power in the Clan." He hurried to Bluefeather's side, who snarled at the other warriors before heading for the camp entrance.

"Gorseflower, Rabbitspring, Ravenstem, and Quailfeather." Redstar growled. "Make sure they leave." As the cats moved off after the two exiles, Skytail looked at Sparkheart, who gaped at her. *I'm so sorry.* She thought, dropping her head to stare at her paws, pelt burning with shame. *None of you deserved any of this.*

Chapter 24

Skytail wanted to claw her own fur off as she padded through the camp. In the three sunrises since Sapfoot and Bluefeather's exile, the Clan was very on-edge and hostile around the new deputy. *It's not like I* wanted *to be Clan deputy.* She thought sourly, sitting down and wrapping her tail around herself with a sigh. She wasn't used to being deputy, having to manage all the patrols and know where every cat was at all times. *How did the other deputies do this?* She wondered and her shoulders slumped.

"Rough night?" Meowed a rash voice as Shadeheart padded from the medicine den and approached. Skytail tensed, remembering his hostility before and after she joined the Clan. *I don't have to like you,* she thought while narrowing her eyes at him, *but I have to get along with you.*

"You can't imagine," she groaned and twitched one ear, shivering as a drop of water hit the ground. "It's been raining for two days," she complained. "Why hasn't it stopped?"

Shadeheart watched her closely. "Warriors don't complain," he meowed sharply and Skytail bristled. What did he know about being a warrior? He's a medicine cat! "Deal with it, deputy."

Skytail ground her teeth together and straightened as the new warriors- Martenclaw, Mistyfrond, Shellwing, Brindlestalk, Weaselheart, Smokecloud, Poppywish, Grayriver, Voleskip, and Blizzardtail- padded from the camp entrance. They'd gotten their full names the day before, and had to sit vigil like every other warrior in the Clan.

"I'm so glad the night is over," meowed Mistyfrond as she looked at Brindlestalk, who was shaking out her legs as she stretched. "I thought it'd go on forever!"

Blizzardtail shivered from where he stood with Voleskip, who looked about ready to fall asleep on his paws. "At least our vigils

were in greenleaf," he pointed out tiredly. He looked at Skytail. "When was your vigil?"

"Leafbare." Skytail thought back to the night when she, Bluefeather, Wispwren, and Greenscar had all been new warriors. It was a particularly cold night, she remembered, and Bluefeather had gone off to do who knows what, and came back at the end of the cold night. She shuddered and looked at the new warriors. "If you aren't too tired, could one of you lead the dawn patrol?" When the ten warriors didn't look too thrilled, she added. "You can have the rest of the day off."

Poppywish stepped toward the deputy, her eyes dim with exhaustion. "I'll lead it," she yawned and looked at the others. "And since *I'm* leading it, I'll take the lot of you." She looked smug as the others groaned.

"I'd rather face an entire patrol of ThunderClan warriors," Weaselheart muttered and looked at Voleskip. "I'm not going. I can hear my nest calling me from right here." Peering around at the other tired warriors, he added. "Anyone else want to sleep and not go on patrol?"

Voleskip shrugged. "I'm not that tired. I could go for a good scrap with a patrol, though." He blinked warmly at Poppywish, who seemed to straighten up as her gaze met his. "Come on, let's go."

As the pair moved off, Blizzardtail groaned. "Leave it to my brother to win over a she-cat right after becoming a warrior." His voice was tired, but teasing as he followed, calling. "Wait for me!" After the pair.

Skytail chuckled with amusement. She was glad to see the naive nature of the younger cats in the middle of so much death and dark times. With a pang, she turned to the other warriors. "Have any of you found possible mates?" She asked.

Martenclaw scuffed his paws on the sodden ground, ears flat with embarrassment. "W-well," he murmured, but a *mrrow* of excitement broke through his voice as Breezepaw, Cherrypaw, and Heatherpaw bustled out of the apprentice's den. At the sight of the young she-

cats, Martenclaw stiffened and his eyes grew soft.

Following his blue gaze, Skytail realized the tom was staring at Breezepaw, who was chatting eagerly to her sisters. "There's your cue," she meowed to her adopted kit as Breezepaw caught his gaze and beamed at him. She nudged his shoulder with her nose, egging him on to go talk to her. "Go for it, Martenclaw."

Her kit- usually so brave and arrogant- looked shy and quiet. "A-are you sure?" He whispered, watching as Breezepaw padded toward the fresh-kill pile and chose a bird. "She's an apprentice, and I'm a warrior."

Brindlestalk rolled her eyes and called out. "Breezepaw!" Martenclaw's head snapped to his sister, eyes with horror. "Martenclaw wants to go hunting with you!"

Breezepaw perked up as Martenclaw looked sheepishly down at his paws. "I'd love to go!" She purred and padded toward the tom, who was being uncharacteristically shy.

Martenclaw looked uncomfortable as he took a step toward Breezepaw, who had her dark-gray-and-white fur fluffed up against the early morning chill. He sent a pleading glance over his shoulder at Skytail, but at her nod, he turned back and followed the apprentice out of the camp.

"Wow!" Breathed Heatherpaw as she trotted up, Cherrypaw at her side. Skytail glanced at Cherrypaw, unease growing like a pit in her belly. *She's not the mother who drove you from your home,* meowed a voice in her head, and her belly tightened. *Maple?* Longing seared in her chest at the thought of her late father, and she ached to see him. "No wonder she's always mooning over him!"

Cherrypaw nodded and gazed at the leaving cats with a flick of her tail. "Let's go find our mentors," she mewed to her littermate. "I want to show Quailfeather how quickly I can beat Darkpaw in a race!"

"Skytail!" Softear's voice sounded worried and she turned to see the curled-ear medicine cat hurrying towards her. Facing the medicine

cat, she was surprised to see distress in her green eyes.

"Softear? What's the matter?" Skytail asked as the she-cat paused in front of her, breathing hard. She could feel the curious and anxious eyes of her Clanmates burning into her fur as they peered from their dens to see what was going on.

The medicine cat stared up at Skytail with wide searching eyes. "It's Redstar," she meowed rapidly with a glance over her shoulder at her den. "He's sick with yellowcough, but I don't have any lungwort left in my stores. It grows on the moor, but I haven't seen any since a few moons ago." She stared pleadingly at the deputy, who froze. "It takes a while to grow, will you let me go to ThunderClan for lungwort?"

"No!" Skytail turned around to see who spoke when Shadeheart ran out of the medicine den, his eyes wide with horror and protest. "ThunderClan won't help us. You heard what happened to Graystep from Squirrelspots and Poppyspeck! They won't help us even if we beg."

Skytail stiffened. "What happened to Graystep?" She never knew of the ancient ThunderClan medicine cat, but whatever happened to the old cat, Skytail didn't think it was good.

Shadeheart looked at Skytail, hesitance in his eyes. "Squirrelspots and Poppyspeck told us at the last meeting that Bluestar killed Graystep for speaking against her." He shuddered and Skytail's eyes widened with horror.

"Blue*star*?" Skytail gaped at the two medicine cats in astonishment. "Isn't she Blue*feather*? That's how she was when Redstar exiled her."

Softear shoved her apprentice and looked up at Skytail. "*Please,* Skytail." She begged. "It'll be quick, I promise!"

Skytail looked around at the rest of the camp, which seemed vacant if not for the countless pairs of eyes peering from the dens. She sighed and looked at the medicine cats. "Alright." She meowed finally. "I'll go with you."

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"I still don't think this is a good idea," Sparkheart puffed at Skytail's side as they crossed the border into ThunderClan's territory. "Asking ThunderClan for help to save Redstar is just *begging* for trouble."

Skytail sighed and glanced sideways at her mate, who wouldn't let her go until she came along. "If it helps to save Redstar," she mewed slowly. "Then we have to. He's our leader, remember?"

Sparkheart shot her a look. "He's also my father," she retorted tartly and Skytail cringed. Her eyes softened and she pressed against her side. "We should have brought more warriors." She nodded to Gorseflower and Quailfeather, who were talking with Shadeheart and Softear. "If we get into a fight, we want to at least leave with our fur on."

A snarl came from the bushes and the patrol halted. "Is that an offer, Sparkheart?" The fur along Skytail's spine lifted as Spiderthorn, Specklebriar, Amberlight, and Bramblefire slid from the foliage and came face-to-face with the WindClan warriors.

Skytail narrowed her eyes at Spiderthorn. "We need to speak with Copperstar." She growled, her claws unsheathing as Amberlight and Specklebriar glanced at them. "Will you take us to the camp?"

Spiderthorn snickered. "Copperstar isn't the leader anymore, Skytail." He gazed mockingly at her. "I'll take you back to the camp to meet our leader just because I want to see the look on your face when you see her." He spun around with a lash of his tail. "Come on, rabbit-chasers, we don't have all day."

"You heard him," Bramblefire hissed and shoved Sparkheart forward with his muzzle. "Get moving."

Sparkheart whirled on the warrior, teeth bared in a snarl. "Watch it, fox-face!" She spat.

Skytail slipped between the two cats and steered her mate where Spiderthorn had vanished. "Not now," she murmured to Sparkheart as she growled at Bramblefire. Trailing after the ThunderClan

warrior, Skytail was suddenly aware of how many trees loomed over her and she felt her throat tighten. The air in her lungs seemed to turn into shards of pure ice that stabbed her insides, preventing her from breathing or speaking. Once they were bundled toward a bramble wall and leaped over it with ease, Skytail pricked her tufted ears as heads turned, fur bristled, and tails lashed.

"WindClan!" Hissed a fluffy cream she-cat from where she sat with a gray tom with white patches. "What are they doing here?"

Spiderthorn was circling below a tree, staring with anticipation up at a rocky ledge with a giant stone pointing over the edge. "Bluestar!" He shouted. "We have visitors who want to speak with you."

Skytail felt unease prick her paws as she watched the sleek dark blue-gray fur of her former friend slip from a cavern and stepped into the sunlight. Her breath caught in her chest and Sparkheart stiffened.

"Greetings, Skytail," Bluefeather meowed, sounding smug. "Welcome to ThunderClan." She perched on the stone, watching the WindClan cats intently. "What is it you need?"

Skytail struggled to find words through the searing pain in her chest that was so powerful, she stumbled and nearly lost her balance before Sparkheart helped prop her up. She stared dumbfounded as Spiderthorn clawed his way up the tree and balanced on a limb, grinning menacingly down at them.

Softear stepped forward, breaking through her shock. "We need to see Graystep," she meowed. "Where is she?"

"I'm afraid you're a bit too late to see her, Softear." Bluefeather meowed, obviously relishing in the shock that arose from the WindClan warriors and medicine cats. "Graystep walks with StarClan now, Softear."

Shock rippled through Skytail as she realized what the she-cat meant and stepped forward, standing at Softear's side. "And what of Copperstar?" She challenged the warrior. "Where is he,

Bluefeather?"

Spiderthorn hissed from where he sat perched on the branch. His claws dug into the wood so hard, Skytail wondered what would happen if they snapped clean off. "Do not talk to my leader that way!"

Bluefeather simply waved a paw at the warrior, her eyes seemingly bored. "Eh, Copperstar's reign over ThunderClan had to come to an end someday. I just made that day come earlier than he expected." Skytail felt her blood run cold. The dark gray she-cat grinned as she took in the deputy's reaction. "That's right, Skytail. I killed him and now, *I'm* the leader of ThunderClan." She raised her chin to the sky, almost gloatingly. "Now, whatever it is you want or need, is out of our paws. Spiderthorn- my loyal deputy- will see you out now."

"Traitor!" Sparkheart spat up at the ThunderClan leader, who slowly blinked, unphased. "You never cared for WindClan, did you? All you cared about was power!"

Bluestar's gaze grew sharp and mockingly sad. "Oh Sparkheart, you're naive to a degree that borders on innocence." Sparkheart bristled as she went on, her claws glittering coldly in the sunlight. "I *used* to care about WindClan, back when that badger-hearted excuse of a leader allowed Skytail to join the Clan." She snorted. "As if an outsider could ever become a *true* warrior! Makes me sick." Skytail narrowed her eyes. "But now, what have I got left to lose? WindClan can burn for all I care!"

"We trusted you!" Skytail yowled, her emotions overpowering her better judgement. Bluestar's eyes grew bright with enjoyment. "You were one of us! You could've been a great leader, just like Darkfeather and Breezeblaze would've wanted!"

"They mean *nothing* to me!" Bluestar snapped. "I have no parents: They're dead to me!" She sprang down from the stone, landing ungraciously on the ground. For a heartbeat, she stumbled, but regained her footing and glared at Skytail. "Just as *you* mean nothing to me, Skytail." Her voice was as cold as the harshest leafbare, and Skytail had to fight the urge to flinch. "Get them out of my sight, Spiderthorn."

"With pleasure, Bluestar." Meowed the deputy as he leaped from branch to branch until he landed stealthily on the ground. "Let's go, rabbit-chasers. It's a long walk back to your territory."

Skytail growled and curled her lip, glaring at Bluestar. "What about my apprentice?" She hissed, her stomach churning. "Where is Sapfoot? Have you killed him too?"

For a heartbeat- ever so brief- Bluestar seemed shocked and she took a step back. Then, her gaze hardened and she let out a bellowing laugh. "Of course I wouldn't kill my own mate, Skytail." Her tail curled high over her back. "Why would I? I am carrying his kits, after all."

Skytail's eyes widened like an owl's and she stared at Bluestar until Spiderthorn shoved her after her Clanmates. She blinked, shocked at what she'd just heard. *Bluestar is expecting Sapfoot's kits. She's his now. And she's the leader of ThunderClan.*

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"Softear! Shadeheart!" Skytail pricked her ears as Morningshine ran out of the medicine cat's den, her eyes wide with horror. "R-Redstar won't wake up!" She skidded to a halt in front of the returning cats and breathed hard. "I-I went to bring him something to eat, b-but I kept shaking him. He-he isn't waking up!"

Horror formed a stone in her belly as Skytail took in the normally brash she-cat's news. She swerved around her, rushing toward the medicine cat's den with Softear and Shadeheart at her heels. She sprinted into the den, dislodging small stones as she scrambled inside. Narrowing her eyes against the dark gloom of the den, she could see the white of Redstar's red-and-white tabby fur glowing in a nest. The stench that arose from the leader's limp form told her what had happened. She hung her head. *Redstar's dead.*

"He must've gotten worse while we were gone," croaked Softear as she looked over at her from Redstar's body. "I will bury him without the help of any other cat. Tell the Clan to stay away: They can

mourn for their fallen leader without touching him."

Shadeheart took a step toward his mentor, who shrank away, her eyes clouded with grief. "Do you want me to help wash him?" He rasped, sounding many more seasons older than he was.

Softear shook her head. "Yellowcough is very contagious, Shadeheart." She meowed darkly and something about it told Skytail that they wouldn't just be sitting vigil for Redstar that night. "I will wash his fur and prepare him for burial. You will take Skytail to the Moonpool."

Shadeheart looked as though he wanted to protest, but he dipped his head in grim agreement and turned to Skytail. "Let's go." He meowed, his voice a low, mournful growl.

Chapter 25

"*Touch your nose to the* pool and close your eyes." Instructed Shadeheart as he stood at the edge of the Moonpool. His dark brown tabby fur was highlighted in silver from the ominous glow of the Moonpool. "StarClan will come to you."

Skytail gulped as she neared the water's edge, warily watching the pool as though it would drag her to its depths and drown her. "Maybe this isn't such a good idea." She glanced at the medicine cat uncertaintly, fear crawling into her belly.

Shadeheart scoffed softly and touched his tail to her shoulder before whisking it away as quickly as possible. "Don't be a mouse-heart," he blinked at her. "Redstar chose you to be his deputy, and he believes in you." He paused, his tone softening. "We all do."

"Even Bluestar?" She muttered bitterly. She knew her old friend didn't want her to be leader, and expressed her displeasure openly. Sapfoot, Bluefstar's mate, agreed with whatever his mate said and backed her up. *We were so close when we were younger. Where did that go?*

Skytail remembered when she had first encountered Bluestar, Bluepaw, at the time. She was a loner living in the nearby barn and grew up knowing of the Clans being nothing but vicious and bloodthirsty. When she met Bluepaw for the first time, she knew she wanted to become a Clan cat and life as a warrior.

When her mother found out, she was furious. Cherrywhisker had attacked Bluepaw, giving her a scratched left ear from her teeth piercing through her flesh. Skytail had helped fight her mother off and since then, she'd been living in WindClan.

Her brothers, Juniperblaze and Marshfrost, had joined the Clan soon after and the three littermates have been living in the Clan since. One day, Cherrywhisker showed up and said Maple, their father, was killed. She begged to be let into WindClan to be with

her kits but Redstar refused and had Skytail and Bluefeather chase her away.

"Skytail," Shadeheart's mew cut into her memories and she blinked at the tom. "It's time."

Letting out a sigh of defeat that she couldn't wait any longer, Skytail crouched down at the water's edge and touched her nose to the glittering surface, shocked by how cold the water was but refused to flinch back as she was sucked into a dream.

"Skytail," a deep voice made her open her eyes and she scrambled to her paws, head reeling as she saw the cat in front of her. It was Maple, her father. Her heart leaped in her throat and she longed to press against her father, to feel his paws wrapping around her comfortingly. "You're becoming a leader, Skytail. Do not dwell on the past."

Skytail hesitated and looked around, seeing eight more cats ringed around her and her father. "Wh-where's mother?" She whispered and looked up at her father.

"Cherrywhisker will never walk with StarClan, and has yet to pass." He rumbled and leaned forward. "With this life, I give you compassion." He touched his nose to her forehead and Skytail felt a bolt of lightning shoot through her. She staggered, breathing hard as the pain subsided and she stared up at her father.

"Th-this is StarClan?" She growled through clenched teeth, forcing back the pain. Blinking up at Maple, she winced at the raw emotion in her father's eyes. "H-how are you here?"

"I was chased out of ShadowClan a long time ago," he meowed. "I believed in StarClan when your mother and I were forced to leave and live in the barn. When she killed me, I was greeted by my brother and here I am." Maple dipped his head and headed toward the ring of cats.

A cream-furred cat padded forward and Skytail's heart cracked as she saw the curled ear of Softear, the medicine cat before Shadeheart and his mentor. "Skytail," the dead medicine cat

meowed, her voice warm and full of pride as she looked at the she-cat. "With this life, I give you honor." The curled-ear she-cat leaned forward and brushed her nose against Skytail's forehead.

Like a rushing river, pride coursed through her veins, filling her from ears to claws. She pictured herself leading her Clan to the Gathering, then into battle. Her cats fighting for their home and honor while she was in the thick of the battle, ripping the fur off any cat who crossed her. She felt triumph as the cat scurried away, whimpering as they called their Clanmates to retreat.

"You didn't deserve to die," Skytail whispered as the pride sank into her body, leaving her shaking in grief. She blinked up at the dead WindClan medicine cat, not seeing the tell-tale sign of where the same illness that had killed Redstar had affected her. "Shadeheart needs you. I need you."

Softear smiled softly at her and shook her head. "I had to, StarClan needed me." She meowed and flicked her fluffy tail. "And now, StarClan needs you." She paused before adding. "WindClan needs you."

As Softear retreated back into the throng of cats, another cat replaced her, his pelt the color of the night.

"I am Shadedfern," he rumbled, his voice scratchy and it rattled. Skytail flicked her ears back, alarmed. "I was WindClan's medicine cat long ago. With this life, I give you endurance." He touched his nose to her head and Skytail felt agony drag at her paws. "Even when you're exhausted and beaten, you'll push your way through." As Shadedfern left, a familiar dark-furred she-cat greeted her.

Skytail nearly choked on her tongue as her former mentor took Shadedfern's place and she bit back a wail. "Darkfeather," she whispered. Along with being her mentor, the she-cat was also Bluefeather's mother and her daughter was named after Darkfeather.

Her mentor blinked sympathetically at her and touched her nose to Skytail's. "With this life, I give you the ability to trust your warriors." A strong wave of warmth nearly swept Skytail off her

paws but she dug her claws into the ground. "When you doubt yourself, turn to the warriors you lead and trust the most. Sometimes, it pays to have loyal friends."

Darkfeather dipped her head and backed away into the crowd. In her place stood a burly gray-and-brown tabby tom with a white chest, paws, and half-circles under his amber eyes.

"My name is Blizzardstripe," he meowed and Skytail dipped her head. "With this life, I give you the wisdom of a medicine cat to put your Clan above all else." He touched his nose to her forehead and something cold filled her from ears to claws.

Skytail panted, shaking as the life soaked into her body. "T-thank you." She spluttered as the tom walked away. Skytail steadied her breath as the cat that replaced him looked painfully familiar. "Redstar."

The red-and-white tabby leader dipped his head and Skytail could feel the grief rising in her throat but she forced it down with a hard swallow. "I always knew I'd see you here," purred the dead leader. "From the moment I laid my eyes on you when Bluefeather brought you into my Clan, I knew you'd become WindClan's next leader."

Skytail's blue eyes widened in shock as she stared at the tom. The fur rippled along her spine as the tom leaned over and touched his nose to her forehead.

"With this life, I give you bravery. When faced with challenge, it's up to this life for you to stand your ground." Redstar meowed. At once, Skytail's body was filled with cold energy, and she felt she could take on all of ShadowClan.

"Thank you." Skytail whispered quietly, bowing her head to the former leader as he spun around and padded away.

A large brown tabby tom with flashing green eyes approached her and she felt her fur bristle. "I see you recognize me," rumbled the tom as he swept his holly-colored eyes over her. "With this life, I give you acceptance. In the future, you will face those who have done wrong. Accept them. And forgive them of their past flaws." He

touched his dark nose touching her head and Skytail sank her claws into the ground.

A freezing ice clamped over her heart as she started to tremble, teeth chattering as though she were plunged into cold water. For a moment, the world around her went dark and when she recovered, a multi-colored gray she-cat was in the tom's place.

"My name is Smokepatch." She meowed, her voice breaking as though she hadn't drank any water for moons. "I have been watching you since you joined WindClan. With this life, I give you honor. Not only is mercy honored, but honoring your Clanmates walking in front of you."

Skytail gasped as her throat suddenly started to burn. Her tail curled in pain and she resisted the urge to fall to the ground and whimper like a kit.

"Stand up." A commanding voice made her eyes snap open as she looked up, seeing the largest tom she'd ever seen. His fur was the color of the sun, glowing with dark stripes with amber eyes. "With this final life, I give you a mother's love. Nothing is stronger than the love a mother cat feels for her kit. You already know what it is like to be a mother, but it will be even stronger in due time."

A strong burst of warmth that took her by surprise made her yelp. She was a mother already, but she never saw her kits after leaving them with Apple all those seasons ago. She longed to see her former mate and see how her kits were doing. Even so, she wondered how they would react.

Redstar padded forward, eyes shining with approval. "I hail you by your new name, Skystar. Your old life is no more. You have now received the nine lives of a leader, and StarClan grants you leadership of WindClan. Defend it well; care for young and old; honor your ancestors and the traditions of the warrior code; live each life with pride and dignity."

Skystar bowed her head to the leader as the meadow roared to life with cheers with the cats who gave her her lives.

"Skystar! Skystar! Skystar!"

Chapter 26

Skystar shook the coldness from her stiff bones as her and Shadeheart returned to the WindClan camp. It felt odd to be the leader after so many moons under Redstar's rule, and seeing Softear's lifeless body curled tightly against the dead leader made her heart ache for them even more. Shadeheart glanced nervously at the mentor who taught him for so long, but he faced forward, a determinated light gleaming in his amber eyes.

"Get the Clan together," the medicine cat told the new leader, his gaze intense. "I'll see if I can't tidy the clearing up before they gather."

Skystar nodded, unease growing in her belly. She'd have to name a deputy before moonhigh, but who would she choose? Neither of the older warriors would agree with a younger cat becoming a leader, and choosing a young cat to be deputy. *There are so many capable cats to become deputy, how can I choose a single one?* She leaped on top of the Fallen Tree, the weathered oak bark creaked under her paws and she winced. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Fallen Tree for a Clan meeting!" The summoning words felt strange on her tongue, and she hoped she'd get used to it before too long.

"Why is there a Clan meeting when the sun's barely up?" Jayfang groaned as he and Sloestrike bustled out of the elder's den.

"Skytail!" Featherpaw charged from the apprentice's den, her eyes wide with excitement. She skidded to a halt before her mother, trembling with joy. "Or are you Sky*star* now?"

"Now now, Featherpaw," Sparkheart yawned as she joined the apprentice, gazing up at her mate with intense pride in her blue eyes. "I'm sure she'll explain everything to the Clan. Go find us a place to sit." Nudging Featherpaw away, she turned to Skystar. "You're the leader now, aren't you?" Skystar nodded glumly. "My father chose the right cat for the job." She purred and turned to

catch up with Featherpaw.

Skystar glanced up to see the rest of the Clan already gathering, their movements slow and tails dragging behind them. She cleared her throat nervously and began to speak. "Cats of WindClan! I have returned from the Moonpool and received my nine lives and new name from StarClan."

Featherpaw jumped up and down with glee. "Skystar!" She cheered.

Sparkheart raised her voice, pride dripping from every word. "Skystar! Skystar!" As the Clan kicked up the cheering, Skystar could hear the disapproval from the older warriors, specifically Ravenstem, Rabbitspring, and Greenscar.

Waving her tail for silence, Skystar went on. "As customary for a new leader, I must appoint a deputy before moonhigh." She stared around at the gathered crowd and drew in a deep breath. "I say these words before StarClan, so they may hear and approve my choice. Morningshine will be the new deputy of WindClan!"

The black-and-white she-cat looked confused as she rose to her paws and dipped her head in acceptance. She said nothing, but Skystar wasn't surprised. *She's never been much of a talker.*

"Morningshine! Morningshine! Morningshine!" Skystar felt pleased at her choice, settling with the older warrior seemed to be a good idea. She was about to dismiss the Clan when Shellwing rose to his paws and yowled for the Clan's attention.

"I have something to tell you all," the young tom began once the Clan had quieted down enough to hear him. Some of the warriors around him murmured to one another, keeping one eye on Shellwing suspiciously. "Since Cloversong's death, I've realized I don't want to be a warrior anymore. I've fought and hunting alongside you all for my entire life, but I don't want this anymore."

Martenclaw looked baffled as he stared at his brother. "Are you going to become a medicine cat?" He glanced at Shadeheart, who watched silently. "Is he going to become your apprentice so soon after Softear's death?"

"I'm not becoming a medicine cat." Said Shellwing as he strode toward the center of the clearing and looked around at his Clanmates. Skystar watched, her curiosity sparking in her chest as he went on. "I've decided to leave the Clans altogether and live with Pepper, Ebony, and the other barn cats."

Silence gripped the camp at the young cat's bold words and Skystar narrowed her eyes. *I knew he was shaken by Cloversong's death, but I didn't know he wanted to leave the Clan because of it.*

Finally, Sandytail rose to her paws and joined Shellwing in the center of the clearing. "I'll go with you," she meowed loudly, her eyes shimmering with affection. She turned to the Clan, who seemed stunned into silence. "The Clan is changing faster than I thought possible. I want my kits to grow up where change is easier and slower than it is in a Clan."

"You're expecting *kits*?" Furzeshine gaped at her sister, her orange eyes wide with shock. "You never told us! Whose are they?" She looked around at the other warriors, who looked equally as shocked.

Sandytail flattened her ears. "Shellwing and I have been mates since I became a warrior and he became a senior apprentice." She explained, and Skystar blinked. *Apprentices can't be mates with one another until they're made warriors.* She looked at the pale-ginger tabby she-cat closely. *It's not a solid rule, but it's not customary for apprentices to have mates.* "I don't want our kits to live without their father."

As if the Clan couldn't get even more shocked, Hayfire rose to her paws and picked her way toward Sandytail and Shellwing. "I will also go with you," she meowed strongly, watching their reactions intently. "The last time we went to the barn, I met one of the new mousers named Apollo. We've been seeing each other every half-moon." She paused and looked over at Skystar. "We're in love. I only found out I was expecting kits a few days ago, and I want my kits to live away from the Clans."

Skystar thought for a moment before bowing her head. "If it is your wish to leave the Clan, then I will not stop you. May the barn cats

treat you and your kits well, Sandytail and Hayfire." She blinked a farewell at the three warriors, who looked relieved.

"Please don't go!" Mistyfrond and Brindlestalk ran up to their littermate, their eyes wide and pleading. Martenclaw was close behind, his eyes unreadable. "We want you here!"

Shellwing shook his head. "But I don't want to be here," he meowed, the pain clear in his voice as well as his eyes. "I don't want to live in constant fear of being attacked by SkyClan and ThunderClan. I want to live to see my kits grow up." He touched noses with his sisters and Martenclaw. "I will miss all of you." His gaze slipped to his other littermates, who looked utterly heartbroken. "I'll always look forward to seeing you at the barn." His voice shook and Sandytail pressed against him, a steady support.

Skystar flicked her tail and raised her voice. "If you're leaving, you'd better go now before it gets too dark." She advised, aware of how many pairs of eyes were watching her and the leaving warriors. "May StarClan light your paths always."

Shellwing looked over his shoulder and blinked gratefully at Skystar. He turned around and paced back to his leader, who slid off the Fallen Tree and strode to meet him, pausing a tail-length away. "You helped me recover after witnessing Cloversong's death." He meowed, his voice sad. "For that, I thank you. It's been an honor to be a warrior alongside you, Skystar."

The leader dipped her head and touched her nose to his. "You and the others will always be welcomed back if you choose to," she murmured in his ear as she drew away. "I hope when I see you again, I'll see your kits as well. Safe travels, all of you."

"Thank you, Skystar. You are truly noble." Shellwing bowed his head low, his chin nearly grazing the grass before he turned around and followed Sandytail and Hayfire out of the camp, leaving the Clan staring wide-eyed after them.

Once they were gone, Skystar leaped back on top of the Fallen Tree and called her Clan's attention. "In the wake of their departure, I

will name five new warriors who have earned their place with us time and time again." Her gaze flitted over to Breezepaw and her siblings, who straightened. "Come forward, you five." As they strode confidently toward her, she began speaking. She named Breezepaw as Breezedawn, Cherrypaw as Cherrystream, Shrewpaw as Shrewrunner, Darkpaw as Darkthorn, and Heatherpaw as Heatherblossom. "I have great confidence in the Clan's future going forward with a full nursery and plenty of warriors and apprentices." She mewed. "No matter what challenges lie in wait for us, we will be ready."

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Skystar decided against going to the Gathering, despite Morningshine's constant yapping about the other leader's menacing sneers they might aim at WindClan's leadership. She made sure to let most of the younger cats go along with Ravenstem, Myrtlestorm, Gorseflower, Rabbitspring, and Morningshine. *They should keep the younger apprentices out of trouble.* She thought, satisfied with her choices. Out of the apprentices, she chose: Featherpaw, Oakpaw, Echopaw, Carrotpaw, Rowanpaw, Mallowpaw, Flowerpaw, Amberpaw, Nightpaw, Strikepaw, and Tumblepaw. *Featherpaw should be made into a warrior before too long.* Pride filled her chest at the thought and she pictured her daughter becoming a warrior. *I'll name her Feathersong. She'd love that.*

There were pawsteps nearing her den and she pricked her ears, seeing Wispwren's fluffy fur and blue eyes through the half-light. "Skystar," mewed the she-cat respectfully with a polite dip of her head to the leader.

"Wispwren," the leader purred and sat up, her tail flicking invitingly into the den. "Don't stay out there, come on in." The moor runner hesitated for a heartbeat before she padded forward and stood in front of her leader. "What can I help you with?" Skystar prompted, noticing her friend's shuffling paws.

Wispwren shrugged as she plopped down, her tail flicking. "I just wanted to talk to someone other than the warriors in the den." Her blue eyes flashed to Skystar and for a heartbeat, she could see an awkward glint in their watery depths.

Skystar tipped her head to one side. "Something's troubling you, I can tell. Spit it out, then. Don't be a stranger, we've known each other since our apprenticeship." She meant to be teasing, but her friend straightened and her eyes shifted.

"Very well," the she-cat began. "I'm thinking about Bluefea- Bluestar becoming ThunderClan's leader." She admitted, and Skystar tensed up. "Every cat this side of the border can tell that she does not like WindClan; It's obvious. But what scares me, is that she might try something to get back at us."

Skystar bristled. "Get back at *us*?" She repeated. "We did nothing to her. It was her who killed Breezeblaze and tried attacking me multiple times! She attacked Redstar when he made me deputy!"

Wispwren flinched at the bitterness in her tone, and she nodded hastily. "I know," she meowed quickly. "But what do we do? With all the new young cats in the Clan, I don't want anything happening to them." Her paws shuffled and Skystar could tell she was thinking about her kits. "What will we do if she invades us and takes us by surprise?"

Skystar touched her paw lightly to Wispwren's shoulder reassuringly. "Calm down," she soothed. "Bluestar won't try anything until she's certain something needs to be done. Besides, she can't do much anyway. She's expecting kits."

The gray cat blinked at her. "Sapfoot's, I bet." Skystar nodded and Wispwren scowled, her claws digging into the short grass. "He was so loyal to the Clan. You were his mentor, and he turned his back on you for her."

"I was only his mentor for a short while," the leader reminded the warrior. "When I was expecting, I wasn't his mentor."

"I know that," Wispwren muttered and flicked her ears. "He could've shown the slightest amount of decency to stay with us." Before either cat could say more, there was commotion outside the den. Wispwren pricked her ears. "They're back?"

Skystar got to her paws and led the warrior out of the den and

narrowed her eyes, catching glimpses of red tabby fur in the moonlight. "Sparkheart?" She called to her mate, recognizing her blue gaze. "What's the matter? Why are you back so soon?"

The look on Sparkheart's face made Skystar's blood run cold in her veins. Not every cat was back, it was only Sparkheart, and there was blood on her pelt. She rushed forward, but her mate only blindly backed away, her eyes distracted and unfocused. "Sk-Skytail," she choked and Skystar winced at the raw grief in her voice. "F-Featherpaw... Featherpaw's...dead."

The world seemed to blur around her as Skystar stared wordlessly at her mate. *Featherpaw...died?* It didn't seem right. It didn't seem *real.* She blinked slowly, trying to process what she'd heard when there was rustling at the camp entrance and she let out a sob. Splayed across Morningshine's powerful shoulders was a gray tabby shape with stripes like shadows, fur matted with blood that stained the ground. *Featherpaw...* Skystar watched in horror as Morningshine took the apprentice's scruff gently between her jaws and lightly placed her on the ground at Skystar's paws.

"Bluestar dealt the killing blow." The deputy reported, her eyes misting and her voice a low whisper. Her claws dug into the ground as her tail bristled. "She was just an apprentice, not even old enough to see battle. She was trying to cheer up Oakpaw when he was talked down to by me." Her ears pressed against her head with anger and regret. "I should never have opened my mouth."

"Sh-she..." Sparkheart fell against her mate, paws clutching at her chest fur. "She couldn't even fight back. She tried so hard, b-but Bluestar..."

Skystar broke apart from her mate and backed away, blinded by rage and tears as she shook violently. *She was going to be a warrior. She was going to be so proud of her name. She was going to be the best warrior in the Clan.*

Shadeheart padded toward her and nudged her to his den. "I'll give you some thyme and-"

Skystar let out a hiss and shoved the medicine cat away, her vision

doubling as tears slid down her cheeks and more replaced them. She realized all eyes were on her, and her stomach flipped over. *I'm the leader. I'm their leader. I'm supposed to be stronger than this.* She suddenly felt sick and she blinked rapidly, staring at Featherpaw's lifeless body sent her over the edge. Forcing her paws into motion, she ran for the camp entrance, shoving by her Clanmates and bursting into the open. A wail of outrage and grief rose in her throat and she let it out, tears streaming down her face as she ran blindly. "I'm so sorry!" She cried into the open air, staring helplessly up at the dark starry sky. The stars glittered coldly with no response and she shook her head. "You didn't deserve this!"

"Skystar!" There was a faint call from somewhere across the moor and the leader crumbled to the ground, sobbing and shaking violently. "Skystar!"

"I'm so sorry, Featherpaw!" She choked into her paws as she dug her claws into her muzzle and face. She could hardly feel the sparks of pain shooting through her as she eventually drew little specks of blood that didn't compare to the immense pain in her heart.

A paw pressed against her shoulder and her head shot up, her pelt bristling as she met the amber gaze of Flintheart. The tom's eyes were a sympathetic blaze of fire and Skystar sat up, sniffling. "It'll be okay, Skystar." He mewed, his voice low but oddly comforting.

"No, it won't." She mewled, cringing at the whine in her voice like a tiny kit who didn't get their way. "Featherpaw is dead. My daughter is dead. And Bluestar is the one who killed her." Skystar glared hatefully across the moorland where the terrain sloped down and the stream separated the woods from the uplands. "There's nothing okay about that, Flintheart."

The tunneler was quiet for a long moment before he sat down beside her and raised his eyes to the open sky. "Have you ever wondered who mothered and fathered Featherpaw?" He asked, his voice barely more than a whisper on the breeze.

Skystar felt herself tense beneath her pelt and she turned her bloodshot gaze onto the warrior. "She's always been Sparkheart and I's kit," she growled challengingly. "Has there been chatter about

otherwise?"

Flintheart raised his tail, his eyes glittering. "I'm only proposing a question that I never heard answered." He responded, but something beneath his mew said something else. *He wants me to guess her real parentage.* The thought twisted her stomach and she looked away from him, suddenly feeling sick. *We've always been parents to Featherpaw, does Flintheart know otherwise?*

"It never needed to be asked in the first place." She rose stiffly to her paws and stalked behind Flintheart, feeling his eyes following her every move. "I want to be alone right now. Go back to camp and calm the Clan."

"Where will you go?" He called after her.

Skystar didn't answer as she set off at a run toward the only other place she knew where she would still be on the moor. She could see Pepper's barn off in the distance and put on a burst of speed. It was the only other place where she would be alone and collect her thoughts while still being in WindClan territory. *I just hope they welcome me.*

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"Hello, there!" Chirped the surprised yet excited voice of Pepper as Skystar entered the Twoleg barn. She was curled in a nest of hay with Ebony washing her belly tenderly. "Welcome back to the barn, Skytail!"

"Skystar?" A familiar mew raked through her heart as she saw Shellwing leap down from a beam of wood that stretched from one end of the barn to the other. The mottled gray tom wasn't as lean as a moor-runner anymore, but he still held himself like a warrior. "What are you doing here?"

There was a thunder of tiny paws as two kits burst from a pile of hay and nearly knocked the former warrior off his paws. One of them was a ginger tabby she-cat with blue eyes and the other was a mottled gray she-cat with ginger patches and amber eyes.

"This is Skystar?" The ginger-patched one squeaked as she circled the WindClan leader, sniffing curiously at her fur. Skystar took a step back in alarm, her ears folding back. "Kind of underwhelming."

"Chepi! Masha!" Shellwing scolded the two she-kits and bundled them back into the stack of hay where they'd entered. "That's no way of talking to a leader!"

There was a small gasp as the familiar pale-ginger tabby face of Sandytail came bounding out of the hayloft and she padded over, her amber eyes round. "Skystar?" Her voice was thick with disbelief and Skystar shifted on her paws, suddenly awkward around the ex-warriors.

"Hey," the leader murmured and touched noses with the couple, piecing together that Chepi and Masha- the kits- were theirs. "Where's Hayfire? Is she alright?"

"Did I hear Hayfire?" Pawsteps vibrated the ground and Skystar jerked around, her fur bristling as a brown tom with a mostly gray mottled body, curled ears- that reminded Skystar so much of Softear- and blue eyes came in. "Are her and the kits okay?"

Skystar felt her fur spike up as the barn suddenly felt too crowded with too many cats. Even the kits seemed to sense the tension and backed into the hay. Her claws unsheathed and scraped against the hard wood floor of the barn.

Pepper slid from the hay where Ebony had finished washing her fur and padded quietly to the leader's side. "Don't worry, Exton," she purred soothingly. "Hayfire and Apollo went to the Pit, remember? They'll be back soon."

"But where are the kits?" Exton's eyes grew wide as he looked around. "Where are my kits?" He began to panic and Skystar grew uncomfortable and shifted on her paws.

Pepper touched her nose to Exton's cheek and Skystar felt a flare of admiration for the barn cat's tender nature and outgoing personality. *She'd be a great moor-runner,* she fought the thought down as a fresh cascading wave of grief for Featherpaw nearly

carried her off her paws and she gasped softly, staggering.

"Are you okay, Skystar?" Shellwing questioned worriedly and pressed against her side steadily. His blue eyes gleamed with concern and she realized how far her grief for Featherpaw had gone. *I'm away from my Clan. My home.* Panic surged through her and she stumbled forward, nearly crashing into Exton and Pepper before she fled into the darkness of the night with Shellwing hollering after her.

Chapter 27

"Skystar?" The leader looked up from where she was laying in a patch of dark, gloomy shade projected by the Fallen Tree. Skystar blinked a few times and realized the cat who was talking to her was Martenclaw, accompanied by Mistyfrond and Grayriver. Prey-scent wafted up her nose, sweet and tantalizing as she spotted a thrush in Mistyfrond's jaws. "Are-are you hungry?" Martenclaw's voice was thick with emotion as he blinked awkwardly at the leader.

Skystar begrudgingly shook her head, ignoring the pangs of hunger in her belly. "No. Give it to the queens or eat it yourself with the elders." She put her chin back on her front paws and she stared at her adopted kits' legs aimlessly.

Beside her, Sparkheart shifted and propped herself up on her elbows. Her once bright blue gaze was glazed and dull, as though she were trapped in a dark pit never to get out. "Jayfang has been complaining of starvation," she mewed to the three warriors, every word dragged out of her like thorns. Skystar winced at the raw grief and sorrow in her voice and screwed her eyes shut as tears threatened to overwhelm her senses. "Go give it to him and Sloestrike."

Mistyfrond shifted on her paws and cleared her throat. "Wh-what about the kits?" She asked quietly and Skystar gulped. "They-they want to see you two."

"They're in the nursery without you now," Grayriver added solemnly. "They're scared and sad about...you know."

Anger and grief washed over Skystar again and she opened her eyes into slits and glared at the tom. "Just say it," she hissed through her teeth and Grayriver's eyes widened with shock. "It's not like we can avoid it, right? Just say what you mean." A lump grew in her throat and she pressed against Sparkheart, her emotions becoming a whirlwind in her mind.

Martenclaw sighed and took the thrush from Mistyfrond and pushed it toward the two she-cats. "You haven't eaten in two days," he urged gently, prodding the bird with a paw. "The Clan doesn't want to see you two starve yourselves."

"Too bad." Skystar growled and shoved the fresh-kill toward Sparkheart, who looked away quickly, her eyes tightly closed. With a pang of guilt, she remembered the dismay and hurt on Petalkit, Dapplekit, and Thriftkit's tiny faces when she told them Featherpaw wasn't coming back anymore.

"What do you mean?" Dapplekit had wailed when Skystar hid them from Featherpaw's dreadful vigil. "Featherpaw always comes back!"

"Yeah," Thriftkit had added with confusion. "Doesn't she like us anymore?"

Skystar was taken aback by their questions. "O-of course she loves you." Her voice cracked as she recalled her daughter's happy face whenever she played with the younger kits, teaching them how to hunt and fight.

"Then why isn't she coming back?" Petalkit had demanded, stamping her paw on the ground in frustration. "If she really loved us, she'd be here right now!"

"Kits," Skystar had felt crushed by their need to believe Featherpaw still loved them. *She'd always love them.* "Featherpaw...went on a journey that will take a very, very long time for her to come back." She'd gone against trying to explain that their older sister was dead, even when Skystar couldn't believe it herself. "When the time comes, you'll see her again, okay?"

Her head spun from the lie and secret she kept from her kits- her own fur and blood- that she'd forced herself not to sleep in the nursery for three days. The three days where Featherpaw would've been so excited to be a warrior with her new name, talking to all her friends and chattering eagerly about leading her first patrol. *But that'll never come now, she's never coming back.* Skystar felt a pain in her chest she hadn't felt since her father's death so many moons ago. Even so, the pain had returned and more agonizing than ever.

Mistyfrond's voice dragged her slowly back to reality. "They keep begging to be clued in on why you're being distant," she stated, staring at Skystar with the same broken look in her eyes as the rest of the Clan. *They all grieve for Featherpaw just as much as we do.* She thought gloomily as she flattened her ears. "Are you ever going to go back to the nursery?"

The nursery. The den where Featherpaw had grown up since being fished out of the stream seemed like a cursed place in the camp since her death. Skystar did her best to avoid the dark den, but she knew her Clanmates were growing worried for their broken leader. *No cat deserves the pain of losing their kit. No matter who they are or what they've done.* Suddenly, the thought of Bluestar's kits crossed her mind. Had they been born yet? What did they look like? How many were there?

"Skystar," Martenclaw interrupted her thoughts and she looked up at him, gazing into his familiar blue gaze. "I talked to Oakpaw's mentor as well as the other mentors and they all agree that Oakpaw and his littermates should be made warriors."

Should be made warriors. Skystar didn't want to make any cat a warrior. Not so soon after losing Featherpaw. *She was going to be the finest warrior in the entire Clan- maybe the around the lake.* She blinked slowly and looked at Mistyfrond, who was watching with concern in her light blue gaze. "Very well," she mewed after a long pause, getting to her paws. "I'll-I'll call the Clan." She turned around on paws that felt like stone and leaped onto the Fallen Tree, her throat suddenly feeling dry. "All cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Fallen Tree for a Clan meeting!"

There was a chorus of squeals as Swiftkit, Berrykit, Snipkit, and Beetlekit charge into the clearing with Woolcloud hot on their tails, screeching after them to settle down and come back. Skystar felt amused at the sight of the kits messing around and caught Twigflower's eye as she nodded and herded her own litter into the open to watch. *Woolcloud's kits should be apprenticed as well.* The burden of being a leader weighed heavily on her shoulders once more and she sat down on the Fallen Tree, impatiently awaiting for her Clan to gather around.

"Cats of WindClan, there are four apprentices who are ready to take on their warrior names and become full members of WindClan." She announced, aware of the lack of enthusiasm in her tone. Sweeping her gaze around the crowd, she picked out Oakpaw, Echopaw, Boulderpaw, and Flowerpaw. "Oakpaw, Echopaw, Boulderpaw, Flowerpaw, please come forward." As they padded forward, she continued, using the words she'd heard many times over previously from Redstar. "Oakpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your own life?" She whimpered quietly at her own words, remembering the oath Featherpaw would've taken had she not been killed.

Oakpaw- though his eyes were dark with grief- held his head high. "I do." He meowed strongly, and Skystar saw Heatherblossom watching him with exctiement and pride.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Oakpaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Oaktalon. StarClan honors your courage and honesty and we welcome you as a full warrior of WindClan." Instead of pausing to welcome the new warrior, she carried onto Echopaw, naming her as Echopool. She went on and named Boulderpaw as Boulderstorm and Flowerpaw as Flowerpetal.

"And now, there are four kits among us who have reached their third moon and will be named apprentices." Her gaze flitted over to Woolcloud's kits and they looked bursting with excitement. "Swiftkit, Berrykit, Snipkit, Beetlekit, from this moment on until you have earned your warrior names, you will be known as Swiftpaw, Berrypaw, Snippaw, and Beetlepaw."

The four young cats looked overjoyed, and Woolcloud looked pleased and licked the tops of their heads happily.

"Sparkheart, Poppywish, Blizzardtail, please come forward and pick your apprentices." Skystar ordered and leaped down from the Fallen Tree, her eyes trained on Berrypaw, who looked anxious as to who would choose her. When she touched her nose to the young she-cat's head, she could sense the waves of shock and eagerness coming off the younger she-cat.

Sparkheart had chosen Swiftpaw, Poppywish chose Beetlepaw, and Blizzardtail got Snippaw, who was talking eagerly to his new mentor already.

"Meeting dismissed." Skystar meowed and looked down at her apprentice. She could see the light in her orange eyes. It was the same light she would see in Featherpaw's green eyes whenever she came back from training and met up with her family. A pang of sorrow mixed with agony pierced her heart and her legs buckled but she forced herself to stay standing. *Hopefully training Berrypaw will keep me busy,* she thought and half-smiled at the she-cat. "Are you ready?"

Berrypaw nearly leaped out of her fur with energy. "Yes!" She squealed and took off toward the camp entrance, Skystar struggling to catch up as she was taken by surprise. "I can't wait to see the moor!"

"You'll have to wait for me!" Skystar called after her as she followed Berrypaw out of the camp and shook out her fur, panting. "You run rather fast, you'll be a great moor-runner."

Berrypaw's eyes lit up at her compliment. "Really? You really think so?" Skystar nodded and the apprentice leaped into the air, her eyes bright. "Thank you, Skystar! Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

Skystar felt a warm burst of affection for the young she-cat and she found herself purring and patting Berrypaw's head with a paw. She blinked and cleared her throat, and Berrypaw blinked up curiously at her. "Why don't I show you where Outlook Hill is?" *I'm giving my apprentice a tour of our territory,* she told herself as they headed toward the sloping hill overlooking ThunderClan's territory. *While also keeping an eye on you, Bluestar.*

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"You did very well today," Skystar mewed to an exhausted Berrypaw as they padded toward the WindClan camp. The leader matched her pace to her tired apprentice's and nudged her as her head drooped. "I'll give you more time to sleep tomorrow and then we can start with some hunting practice."

Berrypaw let out a huge yawn, but her eyes sparkled with excitement. "You got it, Skystar." She blinked up at her leader and gave her a goofy grin. "I'll give Sloestrike and Jayfang some prey before seeing if Shadeheart needs anything."

Skystar felt taken aback by her wanting to do her apprentice duties right away, and she smiled softly. "Alright." She glanced up at the darkening sky, the sun being covered by thick, gray storm clouds. "You'd better hurry before you get soaked." She warned and nudged Berrypaw on, watching as she scuttled into the camp and the heather quivered and she was gone.

"Skystar!" The leader nearly leaped out of her fur at her sound of a cat calling for her. She whirled around, her pelt prickling. No one was there. Her ears swiveled around, trying to catch the call again, but she couldn't hear anything. "Skystar!"

Her paws moved and without thought, she was sprinting down the hill back from where they had toured the territory. Wind whipped at her face, tossing her whiskers back and forth, whistling in her ears while also drowning out the blood roaring. She flew across the weathered ground, unsure of where she was going as she chased the cries of a cat she could not see.

"Where are you?" She cried into the lonely air. The pain of Featherpaw's vigil weighed like a stone in her heart. Touring the territory with Berrypaw had somewhat lifted the burden from her, but with the apprentice not with her, the pain consumed her. "Let me help you!"

"Skystar!" Wailed the voice again, this time closer and Skystar skidded to a stop, rushing the rest of the way up a small incline to get a better view of the land. Her heart was pounding, her throat aching and screaming for water or a break from running. She whipped her head around and around, searching anxiously for the crying cat.

"Where are you?" She shouted back into the open moor. "Let me help!" Silence greeted her words and she sat down, her tail flicking nervously behind her as the cat did not reply. Sighing, she stared down at her paws as rain started to fall. "I'm going insane."

There was a laugh beside her and her head shot up. She knew that laugh. She loved hearing that laugh. She spun around and her eyes rested on the gray tabby face of Featherpaw. Only, Featherpaw was dead. *This can't be real...* She scrambled backward, letting out a startled yelp, her claws tearing up the pale-yellow grass. *This* couldn't *be real. I saw her body...it was cold and lifeless.* "You aren't going insane, Skystar."

It is her. Nothing seemed real as she stared dumbfounded at her daughter. She raised a paw and reached forward, wanting to feel the softness of her daughter's fur and feel the warmth and energy that came from her. Instead, her paw fazed right through and a chill ran through her. *She's really dead.*

Featherpaw's bright green eyes were soft with sympathy and love. Around her, there was a white outline coupled with stars and speckles of white. The wind didn't ruffle her fur or make her shiver, but Skystar was trembling from the cold rain and wind. "I've missed you so much," she padded in around the leader, her eyes gentle. Skystar felt her heart wrench even more. Her movements were slow; sad even as she kept talking.

Skystar felt her claws unsheathe and pluck at the ground as she pictured the Gathering where Bluestar slaughtered Featherpaw. The maniacle light in her crazed blue gaze and the bright red slash that claimed the apprentice's young life. The *thump* of her body as it hit the grass stained red with her kits' blood. She shook her head, imaging the horrified looks on the Clans' faces as they watched it unravel. Then, she flashed back to when she'd saved a little gray tabby kit that was trapped on a stone in the water. Sparkheart and her had argued that day, but also had gained an irreplaceable cat in their lives.

Featherpaw's eyes narrowed slightly as she watched Skystar's claws dig furiously into the ground and she waved her tail in warning. "You were the best parents and family any cat could've asked for." She mewed quietly as she gazed fondly at her mother, who looked up sharply, surprised. "You saved my life that day, and I'll never forget that." She touched her nose to Skystar's, but they didn't touch. "You were the greatest thing that ever happened to me."

The air in Skystar's lungs seemed to be taken out of her at her kit's words. She choked on her tongue as she blinked back tears that nearly spilled down her cheeks. "I-I'll give you your warrior name." She whispered. "I was going to give it to you the morning after the Gathering but..." She trailed off, and Featherpaw nodded. Rising to her paws, she drew in a shaky breath. "F-Featherpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your own life?"

Featherpaw's eyes were shining with pride and love as she nodded. "I do." She mewed confidently, and Skystar faltered but kept going.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name." She took a step toward her adopted kit, legs trembling. "Featherpaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Feathersong. StarClan honors your sacrifice and we welcome you as a full warrior of StarClan." She choked out a sob and in a flash, Feathersong was gone.

Chapter 28

"Like this?" Berrypaw leaped into the air and swiped a paw upward, twisted, and landed on all fours, panting slightly. "Did I do it right this time?" She asked.

Cinderlight nodded and flicked her tail. "You did it perfectly, Berrypaw." She complimented and looked over at Swiftpaw, who was chatting with Beetlepaw. "Isn't that right, Swiftpaw?" She prompted, her ears twitching with irritation.

The pale-ginger tom flinched and looked over at the older she-cat, his pelt prickling with embarrassment. "Er, what, Cinderlight?"

The senior warrior sighed and lashed her tail once. "You need to pay attention, Swiftpaw." She meowed sternly, her voice thick with annoyance. "One wrong move in a battle can mark you forever."

Swiftpaw flattened his ears and ducked his head. "Yes, Cinderlight." He mumbled and Beetlepaw snickered from beside him.

Cinderlight's eyes narrowed. "Why don't you spar against me, Beetlepaw." She suggested and the small tabby tom looked taken aback. Her tail flicked invitingly and Berrypaw cheerily padded toward Carrotpaw and sat down, watching curiously. "Face me and get ready." She warned and when Beetlepaw sent a glare over at Swiftpaw, she darted forward and rammed her paws into the apprentice's chest, driving him backward.

Beetlepaw gasped and staggered, eyes flashing with confusion. Shaking his head, he readied himself. Cinderlight barely looked bothered as she lunged for him again, this time swiping at his shoulder and as he feigned to the left, she tackled his side and flattened him to the ground.

While he spluttered and writhed beneath her, Cinderlight had no problem pinning him to the ground and keeping him there. Beetlepaw tried to kick at her belly, but eventually gave up.

"And that is why you pay attention," the light gray moor-runner meowed and let Beetlepaw up, watching as he scrambled to his paws. After a moment, she turned to Carrotpaw and Rowanpaw. "Since you two are the oldest apprentices, you will spar for your final assessment tomorrow. Everyone else will pair up with your mentor and spar."

Skystar leaned over and whispered in Sparkheart's ear, making it twitch. "Carrotpaw and Rowanpaw will be made warriors soon. We'll have to take a trip to Pepper's barn and tell her and Ebony about their kits."

Sparkheart nodded, her eyes still dull. "They'll be excited about their kits being warriors. There was a note of pain and sadness in her voice, and Skystar realized she hadn't told her about making Feathersong a warrior. *I'll tell her now then.*

Turning to the other cats, she raised her voice. "I need to speak to Sparkheart alone," she meowed, gaining the attention of the others. "Berrypaw and Swiftpaw, you will face each other whle we're gone." Before any cat could object, Skystar led Sparkheart down the hill and made sure the training warriors and apprentices couldn't hear.

"What's the matter?" Sparkheart asked, turning her head to watch as Skystar stopped and looked at her mate. Worry flashed in Sparkheart's blue gaze and she took a step toward the leader. "Is everything alright?"

Skystar raised her head and met her mate's gaze, her mouth growing dry. *How do I tell her about seeing our daughter?* "Y-you know about Featherpaw...right?" She began hesitantly, nearly choking on the wave of grief that nearly carried her off her paws.

Raw emotion sharpened Sparkheart's eyes and she nodded stiffly. "Of course I do," she meowed tightly. "I was there. Why? Is there something wrong? What aren't you telling me?"

"I-I saw Featherpaw last night," Skystar blurted out, and watched the shock and pain grow on the red tabby she-cat's face. "She came to me on the moor. A-and..."

"And?" Sparkheart whispered, blinking away the tears that brimmed her eyes. "What else? Did she say anything?"

Skystar swallowed hard. "Sh-she said that we were the greatest thing that had ever happened to her." She cracked a weak smile and felt her legs tremble beneath her. "A-and...I gave her her warrior name."

Sparkheart's eyes widened and filled with emotion and she took another step toward Skystar. "Wh-what did you name her?" She asked, her voice barely more than a breath on the wind.

"F-Feathersong." Skystar felt as though a huge weight had been lifted from her shoulders as Sparkheart let out a strangled sob and sank to the ground. Tears streaked down her face, and Skystar laid down beside her, curling her tail comfortingly around her mate. Pressing her muzzle to her ear, she murmured. "Cloversong, Brackenmist, Darkfeather, and Redstar will take care of her in StarClan."

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The sun beat down on Skystar as she padded back to the camp, the apprentices and mentors behind her. Berrypaw was chattering eagerly with Swiftpaw and Beetlepaw while Snippaw boasted to Rowanpaw, Sparkheart was meowing to Wolfleaf about checking SkyClan's border, and Thrushleaf was walking in silence beside Skystar.

"You know," Thrushleaf meowed suddenly. "Fawndust and Finchsong's kits should be made warriors soon after Carrotpaw and Rowanpaw. They've been training for a good while and Marshfrost would want to boast about his kits."

The thought of her brother telling the other cats about how great of warriors his kits are going to be warmed Skystar's heart and she found herself nodded with agreement. "I might make them warriors today," she mewed and looked at Thrushleaf, who was nodding. "I haven't seen you fawning over a tom in the Clan," she prompted and Thrushleaf's shoulders stiffened. "Is there a cat you have your eyes on?"

Thrushleaf's eyes sharpened as she stared ahead, her mouth pressed into a tight line. *I overstepped her boundaries.* Skystar thought guiltily and she was about to say more when the she-cat spoke. "Fernpelt and I are rather close, but I don't think he wants the kits." She mewed quietly and Skystar's eyes widened. "I know Wispwren's kits are his, but Shadeheart told me I was expecting a moon ago. That's why I haven't been training with Nettlepaw as much as I'd like to."

Skystar glanced at her sides, surprised when she noticed her belly was bulding from her thick fur and powerful hind legs. "I never knew...." She trailed off, unsure of what to say to the queen.

Thrushleaf let out an airy laugh. "Not a lot of cats know." She meowed, her tone bitter with an edge to it. "Fernpelt doesn't know, and neither does Wispwren."

"Why would Wispwren want to know?" Skystar couldn't help but ask. "She gave her kits to me and Sparkheart when they were weaned off her milk."

The pale-ginger she-cat turned her soft green gaze on her leader. "Wouldn't you want to know if the cat you loved was carrying another cat's kits?" She shook her head and sighed. "Besides, I think Nutfoot would want some help in the nursery since Twigflower's kits are getting a bit too rambunctious for her kits' safety."

Rather than argue with the she-cat, Skystar silently nodded and shouldered her way into the camp. Much to her confusion, there were cats gathered around something in the center. The scent of death hung in the air and dread formed like a pit in her belly.

"What's going-" Thrushleaf broke off as Sloestrike limped toward them, his eyes dull with grief.

"Skystar, Thrushleaf," the elder hung his head and looked behind him where the cats were gathered. Skystar tried to peer through the crowd to see who they were huddled around, but to no avail. "Jayfang is dead."

"What happened to him?" Wolfleaf demanded as he padded up to Skystar's right flank and stared wide-eyed at the younger elder.

Sloestrike's shoulders slumped and he sighed. The graying fur around his muzzle and mouth startled Skystar and she looked at Thrushleaf, who was snaking her way into the crowd to grieve for Jayfang. "I-I'm not sure, to be honest." He admitted. "One second he was sleeping and the next, he wasn't waking up."

Shadeheart picked his way out of the crowd and paced up to Skystar, his eyes haunted with shadows. "He died in his sleep." He reported. "It was peaceful and he wasn't in any pain."

Sloestrike lowered his head with sorrow. "That's how he'd want to go," he murmured sadly and- with the help of Wolfleaf, dragged his paws back to the elder's den.

The scent of Flintheart washed over her as he came up to her, his eyes dark. "That's another cat gone with StarClan," he meowed worriedly as he watched Shadeheart vanish into his den and emerge with some good-smelling herbs. He approached Jayfang's body and nudged him into a position that made it look like he was sleeping. Then, he carefully placed the herbs around him and closed his blind eyes with a gentle paw, murmuring to him quietly. "This can't go on forever."

"There's a ton of cats in WindClan," Skystar meowed, watching as Morningshine paid her respects to the fallen tom. She lingered longer, Skystar noticed, her eyes dark with pain and sadness. *She's lost Cloversong and Redstar, and now Jayfang.* The leader didn't know if her deputy was ever close to the grumpy elder, but they obviously had some history. "But you're right, this can't keep going on." Crossing the clearing to the Fallen Tree, she leaped onto it and looked down at the cats gathered below. "Cats of WindClan, Jayfang is dead, and while we will sit vigil for him, I need to perform a very important ceremony." She looked up at Thrushleaf, who nodded encouragingly. "There are a number of apprentices among us who have long deserved their warrior names. Nettlepaw, Strikepaw, Tumblepaw, Mallowpaw, Amberpaw, Nightpaw, Rowanpaw, and Carrotpaw, please come forward."

"It's time!" Skystar heard Marshfrost mew excitedly to Fawndust, who looked about ready to smack him with a paw. She purred, amused at her brother's eagerness.

"Do you eight promise to uphold the warrior code and protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your lives?" Skystar questioned the apprentices as they held their heads high. When the took the oath, she went on. She named them Nettlespring, Strikestorm, Tumblefern, Mallowcloud, Amberfern, Nightflame, Rowanhaze, and Carrotheart. "StarClan honors your patience and willingness to learn and we welcome you as full warriors of WindClan."

"Nettlespring! Strikestorm! Tumblefern! Mallowcloud! Amberfern! Nightflame! Rowanhaze! Carrotheart!" Came the cheers of the grieving Clan from below, and Skystar cheered with them.

Morningshine was the first to get to her paws and make her way to congratulate the new warriors, but she padded behind them and toward Skystar. "Before this meeting is at an end, I have a request." She mewed seriously and Skystar narrowed her eyes, nodding. "With Jayfang's death, I realize how old I'm getting and I don't want Sloestrike to be alone in the elder's den. I love being deputy and serving my Clan, but I wish to retire to the elder's den."

Skystar had to force herself not to gasp out loud with shock. *I was not expecting that,* she looked at the stunned Clan, *and neither were they.* Turning back to her deputy, she bowed her head in acceptance. "Morningshine, is it your wish to give up the name of a warrior and go join the elders?"

Morningshine held her gaze, as fierce as any rogue or enemy warrior. Moons of fear and respect for the older warrior filled Skystar, and her head lowered further. "It is." Despite the weight of the two words, she spoke them with a confidence that surprised and awed the leader.

"Your Clan honors your and all the service you have given to us. I call upon StarClan to give you many moons of rest." Skystar blinked at Morningshine, who seemed to get the message as she padded toward Sloestrike, who was watching with wide eyes from the elder's den entrance. Lifting her head, she peered around at her Clan, who seemed too shocked to speak. "Now that the deputy position is empty, it is time I name a new replacement. From this moment on, Cinderlight will be the new deputy of WindClan!"

The light gray moor-runner looked surprised as the Clan started to cheer her name, but she relaxed and dipped her head to claim her new position as deputy.

"Meeting dismissed." Skystar meowed and leaped down from the Fallen Tree, confident in her choice as Morningshine's replacement and the names given to the new warriors.

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The Gathering didn't feel right without Featherpaw, Skystar noticed. Cinderlight was busy talking to the new apprentices about what they could and couldn't do during the Gathering while Shadeheart padded silently beside Skystar.

"This is going to be different," Shadeheart mewed in warning to Skystar as they plunged into the Gathering Island. "Bluestar is going to try to provoke you as much as she can."

Skystar flicked her ears at his warning. "I know that," she meowed through gritted teeth, trying to prepare herself to come face-to-face with the ThunderClan leader. "I don't anticipate her being so warm and welcoming after her exile."

Wispwren ran up to her side, her fur fluffed up despite the warm air. "Do you smell that?" She warned, her eyes shimmering in the moonlight. She glanced around warily, her pelt prickling. The she-cat tasted the air and Skystar did the same, her skin crawling as she recognized the scent. "It smells like-"

"Attack!" Skystar's claws slid from their sheathes a moment too late as she was smothered in gray-and-white fur. The scent of Greenscar shot up her nose as she was thrown to the ground, claws ripping and tearing her fur and skin. Bile rose in her throat as she planted her paws between Greenscar's belly and threw him off. She scrambled to her paws as Greenscar slid back, his claws creating deep gashes in the ground.

The pink scars on his face from when Skystar first joined the Clan were still visible, but a bit more pale and faded. Greenscar's face scrunched up with anger as he bared his teeth, eyes glittering with

hatred and a lust for revenge. "You should have never been in the Clan," he spat at the leader as they circled each other, their tails lashing and eyes narrowed. "You ruined everything!" He charged forward, ducking to avoid a lashing paw from Skystar and raked her shoulder, making her cry out. "You should never have been leader!"

Skystar steadied her paws and leaped out of the way as Greenscar lunged for her again, and managed to bite down hard on his tail and unsteady him. He screeched as she sprang onto his back and clawed at his shoulders and ears. Greenscar reared on his hind legs, but Skystar sank her claws into his fur and latched on as he tried to buck her off. She bit into one of his ears and refused to let go, even as he yowled in pain. He threw his weight to one side, dislodging the leader and making his ear rip and blood run freely down the side of his face.

"You flea-ridden rat!" He screeched, his eyes crazed as blood ran down his face. "I'll kill you!" Greenscar leaped at her, paws outstretched but Skystar dove forward. She ran her claws down the length of his belly, blood spurting out to meet her as she watched him fall to the ground. His blood soaked the ground and lapped hungrily at his fur as the light died from his vengeful eyes and he stopped moving.

"Skystar!" Gorseflower cried. Panic was in her voice and the leader spun around to see her being double-teamed by a pale-ginger she-cat and a white tom with a black mask around his face.

Skystar felt panic seize her as she found herself running toward Gorseflower, only to be tackled to the ground by a flash of bright cherry-red tabby fur. A familiar scent wafted up her nose and she gagged as her mother sank her claws into her fur and sank her teeth into her scruff, throwing her away from Gorseflower. She slammed into the ground, struggling to keep her eyes open as her head collided with the hard forest floor and she looked up to see Cherrywhisker sneering at her.

"You've always been the weaker one, daughter," cooed her mother as she snaked closer and closer. Skystar tried to get to her paws, but Cherrywhisker leaped forward, slid beneath her, and thrust her into the ground. "Watch your precious Clan crumble before you." She

snarled and Skystar watched in horror as the pale-ginger she-cat and white tom ripped Gorseflower apart. Her blood soaked the ground as she fell lifeless in a pool of scarlet liquid.

"No!" Skystar felt rage boil her blood as she twisted, sinking her teeth around Cherrywhisker's paw and thrashing her head from side to side. Her mother yelped but she held on tight until she was on her feet and glaring at her. Lunging for her mother, she sank her fangs into her chest and knocked her off her paws, pinning her forcefully to the ground with her teeth fastened into her feather-soft chest fur.

Cherrywhisker screeched in agony, her claws flailing viciously at her shoulder, drawing blood and pain but Skystar held her mother down. Pain shot through her back as a weight landed square on her spine and she roared, rearing up and releasing her mother and letting her scramble away.

Her legs buckled beneath the weight of the enemy on her back and she crumbled to the ground, panting and in pain. With horror, she saw Briarfern- Sparkheart's brother- splayed on the ground with Gravelpelt joining him in a heartbeat. Fernpelt lay not too far away, his throat slashed open and blood pulsing from the wound as Slatefall battled a brown tabby tom.

"You're losing, barn cat," snarled the familiar voice on her back and she wrenched her head around to meet the blazing eyes of Sapfoot. His eyes were mad with anger and bloodlust, and he dug his claws into his former mentor's pelt. "Give in."

Skystar let out a wheeze as she watched the slaughter. Slatefall, Mallowcloud, Amberfern, Nightflame, and Flowerwing were helping wounded cats flee while Nettlespring, Sparkheart, Strikestorm, Tumblefern, and several others were still fighting hard. *Gorseflower, Fernpelt, Briarfern, Greenscar, Gravelpelt...dead.* She felt weak and powerless as her Clan fled, leaving their fallen Clanmates behind. Then, she gathered the remaining scraps of her strength and sprang to her paws, throwing Sapfoot off her and she spun around, slashing his neck with her claws.

Her former apprentice let out a horrible gurgled groan and sank to

the ground, blood oozing out of the wound on his neck as the life drained from him. Skystar had no time to feel guilty or sad as she spun around and ran after her Clan. She paused briefly as she surveyed the bloody scene in front of her and she saw Bluestar grinning at her, standing over one cat's lifeless body. It was Sparkheart.

Chapter 29

"This can't be happening!" Wailed Myrtlestorm as she paced in the clearing. The bodies of their fallen Clanmates were brought into the camp during the night. Waiting that long made the flies and bugs already check the dead cats' corpses for anything worth eating. Gravelpelt, Fernpelt, Sparkheart, Gorseflower, Greenscar, and Briarfern were laying in the center of the camp, positioned as though they were sleeping soundly. "The warrior code has been broken and six of our warriors are dead!"

Cinderlight was trying to calm the Clan from the Fallen Tree while Skystar sat beneath her, her eyes blank as she stared at the body of her beloved mate. *So many moons of us...gone. And for what? Some petty grudge against me.* She felt numb and exposed, as though someone had put mouse bile on an open wound and pressed it in deeper. Her heart was ripped to pieces and the blood roared in her ears, louder than anything she'd ever heard. *Sparkheart...dead.*

"What'll we do now?" Twigflower called from the nursery, her tail curled protectively around her four kits, who were mewling. "If Bluestar attacks the camp, more cats will be killed!"

"I can't have anymore blood be shed unless we do something!" Rabbitspring stopped pacing and stood tall, his eyes ablaze with. "I say we go to ThunderClan and kill them all! See how they like it!"

"Yeah!" Quailfeather and Ravenstem padded to Rabbitspring's side, their hackles raised with anger. "We'll take them by surprise and teach them a lesson!"

"No!" Cinderlight sounded panicked and she looked to Skystar for help, but the leader remained silent, blinking slowly at her deputy. "We can't throw ourselves into battle when we've barely gotten away from one we lost!"

Ravenstem shouldered his way toward Skystar, and she looked wearily up at him. "C'mon, Skystar." He urged. "You want revenge

for them killing your Clanmates, right?" Slowly, the leader nodded, a flame sparking to life in her belly. "Then let's go get revenge."

"Skystar, no!" Mistyfrond and Brindlestalk ran up to their leader, their eyes pleading. "We just lost six warriors, we don't need to lose more!" When the leader didn't respond, Mistyfrond tried again. "Sparkheart wouldn't want this. Please- think this through!"

"Ravenstem's right." Rowanhaze growled to Carrotheart, who nodded in agreement, his tail lashing from side to side. "If Bluestar's warriors kill us, why don't we show them we'll do more than scar them?"

They're angry, and they have a good reason. Skystar's thoughts were slow as she considered her kits' words and her warriors' words. *If we attack, more cats might die. But if we don't, more cats will surely die if Bluestar attacks us first.* She turned her head to Cinderlight, who was working her paws against the hard wood of the Fallen Tree, her eyes on her leader. *These are my warriors, and they'll fight if I tell them to.* Getting to her paws, she stared around at her Clanmates, the ache in her chest fading to nothing. "We will attack them in a quarter moon," she meowed, her voice void of emotion or conviction.

Ravenstem, Rowanhaze, Carrotheart, and Rabbitspring looked eager, along with several other cats. But Mistyfrond, Brindlestalk, Cinderlight, Twigflower, and Thrushleaf just looked worried as Skystar turned away and headed for her den.

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Skystar watched from the side of the Fallen Tree as Petalpaw, Dapplepaw, and Thriftpaw bounded out of the camp with their mentors, leaving the Clan to chatter amongst themselves while waiting to be assigned to patrols. *My kits are apprentices,* she thought as Thriftpaw's tail vanished out of sight. *I should be proud, but I don't feel anything.* She looked over at Cinderlight, who was talking with Quailfeather with their kits. From what she understood, the pair weren't mates anymore, but they remained on good terms for Voleskip and Blizzardtail's sakes. With a pang of grief, she looked up at the dull blue sky. Since Sparkheart's vigil

three nights ago, Skystar noticed nothing seemed bright anymore. The sky was dull, as were the trees on ThunderClan and SkyClan territories, the grass on the moor was more brown, and prey didn't taste good. She hardly spent time with her kits since Feathersong's death, and now she avoided them like greencough. *They have mentors now, they don't need me.*

"You doing alright?" Asked the concerned voice of Flintheart as the ex-ThunderClan deputy padded up to her and sat down. "You've barely moved since the ceremony. Aren't you proud of your kits?"

Skystar was proud, prouder than she'd ever been. Her kits were now training to be part of the Clan, and hunt and fight. But she didn't know how to approach them after being distant from them for so long. She looked at Flintheart and nodded mutely.

Flintheart sighed and scooted closer to her, making her fur prickle as he did so. However, he only moved close enough to mew under his breath. "The Clan is anxious, Skystar." His voice was a low warning, and his eyes were shadowed and haunted. "They want to attack ThunderClan, but they don't want to without their leader at their side."

Skystar didn't respond right away as she cast the tom a tired, wary look. Did he think she wouldn't fight alongside her Clanmates? The thought made the fur on her neck bristle, but she forced it flat. "I'll always fight alongside my Clan." She meowed icily.

The gray cat's eyes flickered and he nodded obediently. "I know," he meowed softly. "I'm not talking about you being physically there. But we need you to be here mentally. You're out of your wits right now, every cat can see it, but we don't blame you. The Clan needs you, Skystar."

Gazing across the camp, Skystar saw Slatefall dragging a rabbit off the prey-heap and tucked in for her meal. Despite the size of the moorland animal, Slatefall's green gaze was distant and clouded with grief. *She's mourning her brother,* Skystar realized, remembering seeing Fernpelt's body with the cats who had died in the surprise ambush. *She grieves for Fernpelt as much as I grieve for Sparkheart.*

"What will we do?" Prompted Flintheart as he rose to his paws and padded in front of his leader. His tone was respectful, and he dipped his head.

Skystar closed her eyes. Images of her leaving the barn, her apprenticeship under Redstar's leadership with Bluestar and Wispwren flashed in her mind. Becoming warriors with her friends, falling in love with Sparkheart, taking in Wispwren's kits, rescuing Feathersong, watching the kits grow up, Bluestar's exile, Redstar's death, her leadership ceremony, losing Feathersong, losing Sparkheart, and now this. Opening her eyes into furious blue slits. Turning around, she leaped onto the Fallen Tree and yowled the summons. Once every cat was Gathered, she spoke. "We will attack ThunderClan," she began. "But not with our Clan alone. I will go to SkyClan and RiverClan and ask if they would be willing to join us."

Lakespots leapt to her paws. "But SkyClan would never team up with us!" She pointed out. "For all we know, Squirrelstar is already aligned with Bluestar!"

"She's right!" Pigeonpool growled, his tail flicking protectively around Swiftpaw. His yellow eyes narrowed as he looked up at his leader. "Going there begging for help would make us look weak!"

Skystar was stunned at the hatred in his words and she took a step back, nearly falling off the Fallen Tree. Her heart pounded in her chest, roaring in her ears and she swallowed.

There was a thunderous caterwaul and she looked over as Brindlestalk, Mistyfrond, and Martenclaw all turned on their Clanmates. Their pelts were bristling and their teeth bared, claws extended. *Don't let a fight break out!*

"SkyClan and RiverClan are our only hope in defeating Bluestar!" Spat Mistyfrond, glaring at Pigeonpool and Lakespots, who snarled. "What if ShadowClan teams up with Bluestar? We'd be crow-food if we fight alone!"

"Bluestar's killed too many of our Clanmates for us to fight alone!" Skystar was shocked as Dapplepaw ran from his spot with his littermates and leaped onto the Fallen Tree with Skystar, nearly

knocking her off. His eyes were glittering with grief, but his voice was strong and powerful. "So what if SkyClan doesn't trust us? Squirrelstar isn't rabbit-brained! He'll see reason."

A loud sneer rose from the mutters of disagreement, and Skystar stiffened. Wollyfire was on his paws and shouldering his way through the crowd to stand in front of the leader and her son. "What's it to you?" He demanded the apprentice. Dapplepaw flinched. "You aren't trained in battle, and you're the leader's little runt!"

"Do *not* call my son a runt!" Skystar snarled furiously, baring her teeth at the warrior. "He's a member of WindClan just as you are, Wollyfire!"

The tom didn't back down. "And why shouldn't we fight them alone?" He continued, taking in Skystar's angry expression. "We have enough warriors. Other than the kits, queens, and elders, we have enough cats to fight Bluestar and her Clan of fox-hearts!"

"Cats will die if we do it alone!" Dapplepaw retorted, his legs trembling. Skystar was awed at her son's bravery to stand up to a senior warrior like Wollyfire, and she admired his courage.

"Cats will die regardless!" Wollyfire spat back in return, his tail lashing.

"Enough!" Skystar raised her voice to a yowl and the clearing fell silent, other than the growling in Wollyfire's throat. She stepped off the Fallen Tree and stood in front of the warrior, glaring up at him as she curled her lip. "If you think we can't team up with cats who know better than to align themselves with a tyrant, then you can go to Bluestar and say we surrender." Her voice was laced with menace, and Wollyfire's eyes narrowed. "If you don't think that, then go sit down with the other tunnelers and wait for my return."

Wollyfire's eyes blazed with anger and hatred, but he dipped his head submissively. "I would never think such a thing," he growled softly. Turning away, he stalked back to his place beside Finchsong and lashed his tail.

Skystar peered around at her Clan. "Any other objections?" No cat spoke, their eyes gleamed as though they wanted to, but there wasn't anything that Skystar could hear. "Good. Cinderlight, Shadeheart, Flintheart, and Martenclaw will accompany me to SkyClan. Get something to eat. We leave as quickly as possible."

Chapter 30

Skystar gazed anxiously at the leader of SkyClan, her shoulders tensed as she finished explaining what happened with Bluestar. "We can't fight them without the strength of your warriors, Squirrelstar." She winced at the desperation in her voice, and she flattened her ears.

The dark ginger tabby tom's yellow eyes were dark with wonder and slight fear. "You say Bluestar has turned on her birth Clan and killed Copperstar?" He growled, his claws working against the dirt floor of his den.

Shadeheart nodded grimly. Skystar glanced at her medicine cat and flicked his side with her tail. He looked at Squirrelstar and his eyes flashed. "Copperstar killed Graystep," he told the tom and Pearfoot- the SkyClan medicine cat- looked at her paws. Grief thickened Shadeheart's voice as he went on. "He would've killed Flintheart if we didn't let him join WindClan, and who knows who else he's killed?"

Cinderlight clawed angrily at the ground, and Skystar couldn't help but twitch her tail tip. *Would Squirrelstar team up with Bluestar instead of us?* The thought seized her and she pictured the rest of her Clan- her family strewn across a blood-stained battlefield, the life draining from them. She shook her head to clear it, and looked at Squirrelstar. "We need you in this fight," her deputy mewed urgently. "Too many cats have lost their lives. This has to stop."

Squirrelstar gazed at Cinderlight, and bowed his head, his eyes flicking to Skystar. "SkyClan will fight with you," he meowed, and Skystar released the breath she didn't know she was holding in. "You're right that no more cats should die. Pearfoot, will you take these cats and get them something to eat? I'm sure they're hungry."

Pearfoot got to her paws and nudged Shadeheart with her bright pink nose. "Come on, I doubt you've ever tried a squirrel before!" She mewed, leading Cinderlight, Shadeheart, and Martenclaw out of

Squirrelstar's den.

Skystar was about to follow her Clanmates, but Squirrelstar stood in front of her, blocking her way. She dipped her head respectfully to the older leader. "WindClan thanks you for deciding to help us," she meowed, meaning every word. "We can't do this without you."

Squirrelstar's eyes softened and he nodded. "Redstar was a dear friend of mine, despite quarreling over territory with him for seasons. I would do anything to help his Clan, even if my warriors will get hurt." He tipped his head to one side. "Are you only going to get us to help, or are you going to ask RiverClan and ShadowClan to help?"

"Just SkyClan, WindClan, and ShadowClan." She replied. "RiverClan is bound to team up with Bluestar; there's no doubt in my mind that they won't. If I can get ShadowClan with us, we might be able to put an end to Bluestar's plans."

"May StarClan light your path always, Skystar." The scars across Squirrelstar's broad face relaxed as he gave her a half-smile. "I'll talk to Vixenstar about teaming up, ShadowClan's territory is furthest from yours, so I'll handle her." Skystar dipped her head and Squirrelstar moved out of the way for her to exit the den. Before leaving, he meowed. "And, Skystar?" She turned around, ears twitching. "Redstar made the right choice when he chose you to become leader. Safe travels."

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Skystar tucked into the rabbit outside her den with Cinderlight devouring a starling at her side. She took a bite and nearly cringed at the metallic taste of blood on her tongue. Forcing herself to chew and swallow, she gazed across the WindClan camp. Wispwren was coaxing Slatefall toward the fresh-kill pile for something to eat, Berrypaw and Snippaw were dutifully cleaning out the elder's den as Sloestrike told a story, and Twigflower was watching her kits playing outside the nursery. The camp was peaceful, more peaceful than it had been in a long time, and Skystar breathed a sigh of relief.

"Are you sure this'll work?" Cinderlight mewed quietly around the bite of starling in her mouth. Skystar glanced over as her deputy's eyes glanced around at the serene camp, taking in every moment. "We could fail and we all could die."

"It'll work," the leader insisted gently, taking in a breath before sitting up. No cat other than her close friends and of course Cinderlight and Shadeheart knew of her plan, but Skystar was doubting everything. "Vixenstar and Squirrelstar are on our side, and we *will* put an end to Bluestar's schemes."

Cinderlight looked up from her half-eaten starling and she stared up at her leader. "I don't doubt your desire to rid the Clans of Bluestar," she meowed softly and Skystar tensed. "But you grew up with her, you love her, and you made a connection with her. It isn't so simple as to kill her."

Skystar sat bolt upright, her pelt bristling as she looked down at her deputy, who had a cautious look in her light blue eyes. "I don't *love* her!" She snarled, and Cinderlight flinched. Guilt swamped her and she buried her claws into the ground. "We were friends. I love Sparkheart and the kits we raised. I don't *love* any other cat." Spinning around, she abandoned her rabbit and stormed across the clearing.

"Skystar!" Cinderlight called after her, but she didn't look back as she bundled herself out of the camp and into the open moor.

"Don't be too upset with her, love," the gentle voice of Sparkheart sent chills down Skystar's spine and the fur lifted along her back. "She's trying her best."

Skystar strode aimlessly along the pale-yellow moorland grass and sighed. "Aren't we all?" She muttered and turned to the white-outlined shape of her beloved mate. Her mouth went dry as she gazed wordlessly at the red-and-white tabby she-cat standing before her. What could she say? What could let Sparkheart know she should've been there to help her? "I-"

"Shhh," Sparkheart admonished softly and put a starry paw to Skystar's mouth, but it went straight through and sent icy chills

throughout the leader's body, making her gasp. "It's not your fault. It was my time."

"It shouldn't be any cat's time to join StarClan," Skystar whispered, staring helplessly at her mate. Former mate? She longed to feel the warmth of Sparkheart's body next to her, feeling her fur brush against hers, hear her sweet laugh when she told a joke. *But Bluestar took that away from me.* Her claws dug into the weathered ground and she forced back tears that swelled unwelcomingly in her eyes. *She took everything away from me!* A yowl of sorrow and anger formed in her throat, and she swallowed it down.

Sparkheart's eyes glowed with love and sympathy. "The Clan needs you," she said, her voice strong and Skystar blinked sadly. Grief clogged her throat and she dropped her ears. "The Clans need you, Skystar. SkyClan and ShadowClan need you to lead them." She dipped her head. "So lead them."

Determination solidified in her belly as she looked at her dead mate. As Sparkheart fizzled away into nothingness, she turned her paws back to the direction of the camp. *I can do this, I will do this.* She set off at a run, narrowing her eyes. *I have to do this.*

***

"Skystar!" Breezedawn's sharp yowl awoke the WindClan leader and she lifted her head from under the shade of the Fallen Tree. The gray-and-white she-cat was striding toward her, numerous different-smelling cats in tow behind her. Skystar scrambled to her feet as she saw Squirrelstar and Vixenstar. "SkyClan and ShadowClan are here."

"Thank you, Breezedawn." Skystar meowed to the warrior and padded over, taking in the sight of so many cats in the open camp. Dipping her head to the other two leaders, she added. "Thank you for coming."

Vixenstar looked around, her light calico pelt prickling. "It's so strange being on the moor," she mewed, turning back to Skystar. "How's it like living without trees to shelter you?"

Skystar purred. "It's rather freeing," she answered and twitched her whiskers. "Who all did you bring?" She asked, looking at Squirrelstar.

The SkyClan leader seemed uncomfortable as he shifted his paws. *They're not used to being out in the open,* she thought, twitching her tail tip with amusement. "Sandleaf, Pearfoot, Splashbrook, Dewbriar, Rainstrike, Cloudbreeze, Hickorytooth, Rocktooth, Smokespots, Hailfall, Redberry, Eelheart, Waspfall, Otterwhisker, Lakewhisker, Snakefang, Applestorm, Ivyscar, Plumwing, Thrushfur, Bluepool, Robinfeather, Vinesplash, Blizzardheart, Shadowfall, Eaglestorm, Peardawn, Whitesky, Whitewhisker, Minkfoot, Appleheart, Featherbird, Timberwing, Cloverstream, Lightwhisker, Fernstep, Dawnslip, Leafstrike, Lilybird, Sedgewing, Woodheart, and Mistlethistle." The tom replied, and Skystar's eyes widened at the number of warriors in his Clan.

"I brought Gorsefeather, Squirrelspots, Poppyspeck, Cindershine, Speckleleaf, Rosespots, Peartail, Speckledpuddle, Echoshine, Yellowleaf, Honeyshine, Icebelly, Moonwing, Oakfire, Badgerleaf, Cloudwing, Hollypelt, Foxfeather, Snailtail, and Houndwhisker."

At the mention of Moonwing, Oakfire, Badgerleaf, and Cloudwing, the warriors bustled forward and swarmed Skystar, purring their greetings. Even Badgerleaf touched noses with the WindClan leader and gave her a half-smile.

"WindClan thanks you both for bringing so many cats," she mewed respectfully to the Clan leaders, astonished that they would bring so many warriors to fight against RiverClan and ThunderClan. "We need them to win this fight." Turning around, she leaped onto the Fallen Tree. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Fallen Tree for a Clan meeting!" Most cats were already in the clearing at the scent of so many different cats, but a few were inside their dens. "All the warriors will join us in this battle." She told her Clan. "Elders, queens, apprentices, and kits will stay here. If Bluestar and her cats attack the camp, the apprentices will help fend them off."

"But we want to fight!" The voice of Petalpaw made Skystar's chest tighten as her daughter stood defiantly with her brothers. Skystar

shook her head.

"You're too inexperienced and young to fight," she mewed gently. "There will be other battles, but this one is one I don't want you fighting in." Without letting her daughter argue, she looked at the gathered cats. There was the same glint of excitement and fear shared in all their eyes, and Skystar realized that no cat was different than another. *Just because we live in different territories and eat different prey, doesn't mean we aren't the same.* Raising her head to the sky, she let out a yowl that the other cats joined in on, echoing throughout the moor.

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Skystar led the cats with her through the moor and over the stream, slipping into the undergrowth of ThunderClan's forest. She glimpsed the red walls of the barn and felt a pang of longing that she pushed away as she made her way through the trees until a wall of brambles and thorns came into view. *ThunderClan's camp.* She thought and steered to the left where the strong scent of cats grew thicker and two guards sitting outside a funnel came in sight.

Squirrelstar stalked silently to Skystar's side and narrowed his eyes. "That's Pearpool and Sedgeclaw of RiverClan," he growled to Skystar and looked over his shoulder, whispering. "Snakefang, Otterwhisker, off you go."

The two warriors nodded obediently and slipped toward the two RiverClan warriors, who seemed bored but alert. There was a volley of yowling as the two SkyClan warriors locked into battle with them, and allowed the other cats to charge into the ThunderClan camp, hungry for blood and victory.

"Attack!" Skystar yowled and ran for the nearest cat to her, slamming into a black-and-white tom who shrieked with surprise as he sank his claws into her pelt. Dodging a blow to her cheek, she twisted and sank her teeth into his shoulder, clawing at his side while he yowled with pain. Claws tore viciously at her shoulder and she wrenched herself free as another cat came to aid their Clanmates. Coming nose-to-nose with Blackthorne as the small she-cat bit down into her hind leg and dragging her off her Clanmate.

"Get away from him!" She snarled and clawed at Skystar's hindlegs, making her screech in agony. Rearing on her hindlegs, Blackthorne brought her paws down hard on Skystar's head and the leader crumpled to the ground, dazed and head spinning.

Shaking off her shock, Skystar lunged forward and snapped at Blackthorne's paws, making the smaller cat yelp and scramble backward until she tripped over her tail and fell onto her back. Springing forward, Skystar sank her teeth into the she-cat's neck and tossed her away, watching as she fell to the ground, scrambled to her paws with her neck bleeding and ran away. While she was distracted, the tom- Ravenwish- leapt at Skystar's throat and bit down hard, throwing the leader to the ground while she madly lashed at his chest. Pain exploded in her neck as she gasped, her blows becoming weaker and weaker until she stopped fighting back altogether and closed her eyes. After a few silent and black heartbeats, Skystar was still until she groggily blinked open her eyes and sluggishly got to her paws, her head throbbing.

Ravenwish had turned his back on her and was lashing at Fernstep's ears until blood ran freely down the she-cat's face. Whilst he was distracted with battling Fernstep, Skystar leaped onto his back and lunged for his neck, sinking her teeth in and forcing him to the ground. She held on until the tom's squirming ceased and he fell limp beneath her.

Skystar let go of his neck and looked at Fernstep, panting. "Are you alright?" She asked, breathing hard as the blood roared like a lion in her ears.

Fernstep stared back at her, her gaze flicking to Ravenwish's body before slowly nodding. "Thank you," she mewed, sounding astonished and shaken. Skystar blinked at the she-cat and watched as the pale warrior ran off to aid the other warriors.

All around Skystar, the battle raged on as blood and fury thickened the air, clogging her senses and making her dizzy. She put a bloody paw to the wound on her neck that claimed her first life and breathed a sigh of relief that it was closed. The pain was still there,

but the wound was gone. Catching her breath, she scanned the bloody camp and saw the body of Cinderlight with a pool of blood growing around her. Heartbroken at the sight of her dead deputy, Skystar let out a choked sob and bowed her head.

"Skystar!" Flintheart's voice rang in her ears as the gray tom bounded to her side. Looking over the older tom's pelt, Skystar winced as she saw his ear was torn, his fur was bloody and several wounds laced his powerful body. "We've overpowered the ThunderClan and RiverClan cats. We're beating them, but they're claiming the lives of so many cats." His gaze flitted over Cinderlight's body and he drew in a sharp breath. "Who will be the new deputy?" He asked, looking back to Skystar.

Skystar touched noses with the former ThunderClan warrior. "You will be the new deputy, Flintheart." She meowed and Flintheart's eyes widened, but he nodded his acceptance and flicked his tail. "Who else are dead?"

"Too many," he meowed sadly. "Ravenstem, Lakespots, Rabbitspring, Quailfeather, Darkthorn, Oaktalon, Wollyfire, Finchsong, Driftbird, and Hawkpool."

"And what about the other cats?"

"I saw Moonwing, Speckledpuddle, and Yellowleaf from ShadowClan. Minkfoot, Featherbird, Whitewhisker, and Timberwing from SkyClan." Flintheart hung his head. "You have to stop Bluestar. If she's dead, this might stop everything."

Skystar nodded and dipped her head to her new deputy. "Thank you, Flintheart." Turning around, she ran into the throng of tussling cats. *Where are you, Bluestar?*

Chapter 31

Skystar's eyes flicked around the ruined ThunderClan camp where cats were fighting to the death. The bodies of so many warriors were strewn across the clearing and it made the leader sick to her stomach. *Where are you, Bluestar?* She scanned the camp for the familiar pelt of her old friend. It wasn't until a sharp cry alerted her to a tussle beneath a giant tree by the back of the camp. Her belly tightened as Bluestar slashed open Slatefall's throat and the warrior thumped to the ground, the life draining from her. The screech the ripped through the air shocked her as Skystar realized it came from her as she raced through the battling cats and tackled Bluestar, digging her claws into the pelt of her old friend.

"How nice of you to join us, Skytail." Sneered Bluestar as she twisted out of Skystar's grip and slashed her shoulder, and Skystar gasped and whirled around to face her enemy. "I was beginning to wonder if you'd ever join us."

Skystar bared her teeth and lashed her tail. She wasn't going to have her back turned to Bluestar for even a heartbeat, and she arched her back. "This has to stop, Bluestar." She growled, glaring at her former friend. "Your cats are losing this battle. You won't win."

Bluestar cackled and flattened her tufted ears, pinning Skystar with her eyes. "Do you think I care?" She bared her teeth and Skystar flinched involuntarily. "Those cats mean *nothing* to me! It's only you who I'm after, Skytail. *You* ruined everything for me!" She lunged forward, and carried Skystar off her paws, pinning her to the ground with her paws on either side of her. Skystar growled and gloared up at her enemy, filled with mixed emotions. "You've always been the Clan's favorite!" Bluestar spat in Skystar's face, and the WindClan leader cringed. "Ever since you were a 'paw, you've been a thorn in my side!"

"We were friends!" Skystar protested weakly, pushing the crazed she-cat off of her and staggering to her shaking legs. "I trusted you!" Her legs trembled, threatening to give out beneath her. "I loved

you!" All the emotions she'd felt for the traitorous cat in front of her spilled out in her voice. The joy of being an apprentice, pride in becoming a warrior, the shock as Bluestar turned her back on her Clan, and the burning desire to make her pay for taking away her family. The longing to be part of her friend's big life when she was younger, to not be excluded from her for a second made her choke and she launched herself at Bluestar, not caring that tears were streaking down her cheeks and dotting the ground. She wanted it to end. The battle, the heartache, the misery, and guilt all to be gone.

Bluestar let out an incoherent yowl and clawed at Skystar's shoulder, but the she-cat barely felt it. They flipped, twisted, and saumersaulted to and fro, locked into a neverending tussle that would only stop when the other was dead. Claws and teeth ripped into Skystar's pelt and flesh, making blood run down her body but she only had eyes for the cat who threw away their entire friendship for *this.* The sting of being rejected as a young warrior, the agony of killing Sapfoot, the horror of realizing Feathersong wasn't coming back from the Gathering that ended her life, and the overwhelming amount of responsibility of being WindClan's new leader lent strength and energy into each of Skystar's blows.

She wanted to scream and shout at Bluestar, she wanted to ask why it had to come to this. Why did it always have to end with violence and bloodshed? Why did it have to end with death and grief? Skystar sank her teeth deep into Bluestar's shoulder and, with the strength she'd never felt before, tossed her up against the tree that Spiderthorn had perched on when she'd first found out about Copperstar's untimely death. Bluestar's head connected with the hard bark of the tree with a *crack* and for a heart-stopping moment, she lay on the ground. For one single heartbeat, Skystar felt grief swell inside her at the thought of killing her best friend, the cat she'd grown up with and loved almost as much as she loved Sparkheart, but then Bluestar sluggishly got to her feet and charged at her. There was anger and hatred in her blue eyes, and it startled Skystar. Where was the fun-loving, carefree apprentice she'd befriended so many moons ago? Was that cat even real? Was it all a dream?

A second cat's scent shot up her nose and Skystar was suddenly

thrust into the dirt, pinned to the ground. With a sharp twist that unbalanced her attacker, she was faced with her mother. The cat who was supposed to love her, raise her to be good, teach her all about being a mother. But Cherrywhisker was far from that. This cat that stood before her wasn't her mother; but a monster. This cat had abused her daughter, treated her sons far better, killed her mate, and tried to kill Skystar. This cat didn't deserve to live a heartbeat longer. Not when there were other cats who deserved to be loved and cared for from a mother who loved them for who they were, not for who they could've or should've been.

In a flash of swiping claws, fury, and a slash of bright red, Cherrywhisker was dead at Skystar's paws. There was nothing she could feel for the cat who hadn't raised her right. Skystar stared at the lifeless body of the cat who was supposed to love her and she turned away, feeling sick. Once more, she was faced with Bluestar. Narrowing her eyes, she ran at her old friend one last time. For a heartbeat, she saw the apprentice Bluestar had once been. Then, the bloodthirsty, arrogant, and murderous cat had returned. They clashed in a whirlwind of teeth and claws. They bit, scratched, clawed, and kicked with all their might. Skystar dug her claws into Bluestar's shoulders and flipped over with her on top of the gray leader. Raising a shaking paw, she slashed open the leader's neck. In truth, she didn't want to kill her best friend, but what other choice was there? Bluestar wouldn't live as a rogue without terrorizing the Clans, and there was no way she'd live as a kittypet. No, this was the only way for peace to befall the Clans once more.

"Too scared to kill another cat, Skystar?" Spat Bluestar, her voice filled with all the cold and harshness of leafbare. "I thought you'd get used to it, after you killed Sapfoot."

Skystar shuddered as she remembered the bright red slash opening the tom's throat and watching in horror as the ex-WindClan warrior bled out, all while Bluestar watched. She found her voice and weakly mewed. "It was your fault Sapfoot is dead," she blinked at Bluestar, emotions and memories exploding inside her. "Your grudge against WindClan got him killed."

Bluestar snarled in return, but it came out gurgled and Skystar flinched, looking down at the claw marks where she'd struck her.

She couldn't bear to look away, she couldn't. How could she? "He died for a cause he believed in."

Skystar shook her head, her claws digging into the earth. "No." She meowed, surprising herself at how calm and level her voice sounded. "He died for a cause you believed in. You got him killed because you couldn't let go of your bitterness."

The dark gray she-cat writhed beneath Skystar, her eyes dark pools of hatred. "You dishonor his memory, you half-witted excuse of a leader." She taunted, her eyes twinkling. "Go on, finish me off." She exposed her throat, and Skystar hesitated. She knew her former friend would bleed out long before she'd ever kill her. Something about that made her even more uneasy. "You brought shame upon the Clans the moment Redstar welcomed you into WindClan."

"You brought me to do this, Bluestar." Skystar gritted her teeth against the pain as her wounds started to sting. "Look around you! Was all of this worth it? What cause do you so passionately believe in? How many more cats have to die because of you?"

The ThunderClan leader let out a gurgled moan, which Skystar realized was an attempt at laughter. "Every drop of my warriors' blood means more to me than you will ever know." She glared into Skystar's eyes, piercing through her heart. "You came here because of me. I brought you into the Clan, I can take you out of it." She tried to aim a blow for Skystar's neck, but her paw barely moved off the ground.

Something hardened in Skystar's belly as she looked down at the vile leader. All those seasons ago, Bluestar brought her into WindClan, where she thrived and was trusted enough to become deputy and eventually leader. She met Bluestar's gaze without flinching. "You're wrong," she meowed and Bluestar's eyes widened ever so slightly. "I'm not here for you. I'm here for my Clan and my warriors. My family." She backed off the she-cat and turned away. "You will not get the satisfaction of dying by my claws, Bluestar. You will die like the rogue you always have been."

"Coward!" Cried Bluestar but she refused to turn around. She felt

strangely free, like whatever had held onto her for so long was finally letting go. "Come back here and fight me like a real warrior, you kittypet!" She could hear anguish and desire in Bluestar's mew, but she kept walking until she knew the ThunderClan leader, her friend- her enemy- was dead.